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THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT  
IN LITERATURE

THE  
SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT  
IN LITERATURE

BY  
ARTHUR SYMONS

LONDON  
WILLIAM HEINEMANN  
1899

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## TO W. B. YEATS

*May I dedicate to you this book on the Symbolist movement in literature, both as an expression of a deep personal friendship and because you, more than any one else, will sympathise with what I say in it, being yourself the chief representative of that movement in our country? France is the country of movements, and it is naturally in France that I have studied the development of a principle which is spreading throughout other countries, perhaps not less effectually, if with less definite outlines. Your own Irish literary movement is one of its expressions; your own poetry and A. E.'s poetry belong to it in the most intimate sense. In Germany it seems to be permeating the whole of literature, its spirit is that which is deepest in Ibsen, it has absorbed the one new force in Italy, Gabriele d'Annunzio. I am told of a group of Symbolists in Russian literature, there is another in Dutch literature, in Portugal it has a little school of its own under Eugenio de Castro; I even saw some faint strivings that way in Spain, and the aged Spanish poet Campoamor has always fought on behalf of a "transcendental" art in which we should recognise much of what is most essential in the doctrine of Symbolism. How often have you and I discussed all these questions, rarely arguing about them, for we rarely had an essential difference of opinion, but bringing them more and more clearly into light, turning our instincts into logic, digging until we reached the bases of our convictions. And all the while we were working as*

well as thinking out a philosophy of art; you, at all events, creating beautiful things, as beautiful, it seems to me, as anything that is being done in our time.

And we talked of other things besides art, and there are other sympathies, besides purely artistic ones, between us. I speak often in this book of Mysticism, and that I, of all people, should venture to speak, not quite as an outsider, of such things, will probably be a surprise to many. It will be no surprise to you, for you have seen me gradually finding my way, uncertainly but inevitably, in that direction which has always been to you your natural direction. Still, as I am, so meshed about with the variable and too clinging appearances of things, so weak before the delightfulness of earthly circumstance, I hesitate sometimes in saying what I have in my mind, lest I should seem to be saying more than I have any personal right to say. But what, after all, is one's personal right? How insignificant a matter to any one but oneself, a matter how deliberately to be disregarded in that surely impersonal utterance which comes to one in one's most intimate thinking about beauty and truth and the deeper issues of things!

It is almost worth writing a book to have one perfectly sympathetic reader, who will understand everything that one has said, and more than one has said, who will think one's own thought whenever one has said exactly the right thing, who will complete what is imperfect in reading it, and be too generous to think that it is imperfect. I feel that I shall have that reader in you; so here is my book in token of that assurance.

ARTHUR SYMONS.

LONDON, June 1899.



# CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	I
GÉRARD DE NERVAL . . . . .	II
VILLIERS DE L'ISLE ADAM . . . . .	39
ARTHUR RIMBAUD . . . . .	61
PAUL VERLAINE ' . . . . .	77
JULES LAFORGUE . . . . .	103
STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ . . . . .	115
HUYSMANS AS A SYMBOLIST . . . . .	139
MAETERLINCK AS A MYSTIC . . . . .	151
CONCLUSION . . . . .	169
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND NOTES . . . . .	177



## INTRODUCTION

"It is in and through Symbols that man, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works, and has his being: those ages, moreover, are accounted the noblest which can the best recognise symbolical worth, and prize it highest"

CARLYLE

WITHOUT symbolism there can be no literature; indeed, not even language. What are words themselves but symbols, almost as arbitrary as the letters which compose them, mere sounds of the voice to which we have agreed to give certain significations, as we have agreed to translate these sounds by those combinations of letters? Symbolism began with the first words uttered by the first man, as he named every living thing; or before them, in heaven, when God named the world into being. And we see, in these beginnings, precisely what Symbolism in literature really is: a form of expression, at the best but approximate, essentially but arbitrary, until it has obtained the force of a

#### 4 THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT

convention, for an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness. It is sometimes permitted to us to hope that our convention is indeed the reflection rather than merely the sign of that unseen reality. We have done much if we have found a recognisable sign.

"A symbol," says Comte Goblet d'Alviella, in his book on *The Migration of Symbols*, "might be defined as a representation which does not aim at being a reproduction." Originally, as he points out, used by the Greeks to denote "the two halves of the tablet they divided between themselves as a pledge of hospitality," it came to be used of every sign, formula, or rite by which those initiated in any mystery made themselves secretly known to one another. Gradually the word extended its meaning, until it came to denote every conventional representation of idea by form, of the unseen by the visible. ["In a Symbol," says Carlyle, "there is concealment and yet revelation: hence therefore, by Silence and by Speech acting together, comes a double significance."] And, in that fine chapter of *Sartor Resartus*, he goes further, vindicating for the word its full value: "In the Symbol proper, what, we can call a Symbol, there is ever, more or less distinctly and

directly, some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there."

It is in such a sense as this that the word Symbolism has been used to describe a movement which, during the last generation, has profoundly influenced the course of French literature. All such words, used of anything so living, variable, and irresponsible as literature, are, as symbols themselves must so often be, mere compromises, mere indications. Symbolism, as seen in the writers of our day, would have no value if it were not seen also, under one disguise or another, in every great imaginative writer. What distinguishes the Symbolism of our day from the Symbolism of the past is that it has now become conscious of itself, in a sense in which it was unconscious even in Gérard de Nerval, to whom I trace the particular origin of the literature which I call Symbolist. The forces which mould the thought of men change, or men's resistance to them slackens; with the change of men's thought comes a change of literature, alike in its inmost essence and in its outward form: after the world has starved its soul long enough in the contemplation and the re-

## 6 THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT

arrangement of material things, comes the turn of the soul; and with it comes the literature of which I write in this volume, a literature in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream.

The great epoch in French literature which preceded this epoch was that of the offshoot of Romanticism which produced Baudelaire, Flaubert, the Goncourts, Taine, Zola, Leconte de Lisle. Taine was the philosopher both of what had gone before him and of what came immediately after; so that he seems to explain at once Flaubert and Zola. It was the age of Science, the age of material things; and words, with that facile elasticity which there is in them, did miracles in the exact representation of everything that visibly existed, exactly as it existed. Even Baudelaire, in whom the spirit is always an uneasy guest at the orgie of life, had a certain theory of Realism which tortures many of his poems into strange, metallic shapes, and fills them with imitative odours, and disturbs them with a too deliberate rhetoric of the flesh. Flaubert, the one impeccable novelist who has ever lived, was resolute to be the novelist of a world in which art, formal art, was the only escape from the burden of reality, and in which

the soul was of use mainly as the agent of fine literature. The Goncourts caught at Impressionism to render the fugitive aspects of a world which existed only as a thing of flat spaces, and angles, and coloured movement, in which sun and shadow were the artists; as moods, no less flitting, were the artists of the merely receptive consciousnesses of men and women. Zola has tried to build in brick and mortar inside the covers of a book; he is quite sure that the soul is a nervous fluid, which he is quite sure some man of science is about to catch for us, as a man of science has bottled the air, a pretty, blue liquid. Leconte de Lisle turned the world to stone, but saw, beyond the world, only a pause from misery in a Nirvana never subtilised to the Eastern ecstasy. And with all these writers, form aimed above all things at being precise, at saying rather than suggesting, at saying what they had to say so completely that nothing remained over, which it might be the business of the reader to divine. And so they have expressed, finally, a certain aspect of the world; and some of them have carried style to a point beyond which the style that says, rather than suggests, cannot go. The whole of that movement comes to a splendid funeral in M. de

## 8 THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT

Heredia's sonnets, in which the literature of form says its last word, and dies.

Meanwhile, something which is vaguely called Decadence had come into being. That name, rarely used with any precise meaning, was usually either hurled as a reproach or hurled back as a defiance. It pleased some young men in various countries to call themselves Decadents, with all the thrill of unsatisfied virtue masquerading as uncomprehended vice. As a matter of fact, the term is in its place only when applied to style; to that ingenious deformation of the language, in Mallarmé for instance, which can be compared with what we are accustomed to call the Greek and Latin of the Decadence. No doubt perversity of form and perversity of matter are often found together, and, among the lesser men especially, experiment was carried far, not only in the direction of style. But a movement which in this sense might be called Decadent could but have been a straying aside from the main road of literature. Nothing, not even conventional virtue, is so provincial as conventional vice; and the desire to "bewilder the middle-classes" is itself middle-class. The interlude, half a mock-interlude, of Decadence, diverted the attention of the critics while



something more serious was in preparation. That something more serious has crystallised, for the time, under the form of Symbolism, in which art returns to the one pathway, leading through beautiful things to the eternal beauty.

In most of the writers whom I have dealt with as summing up in themselves all that is best in Symbolism, it will be noticed that the form is very carefully elaborated, and seems to count for at least as much as in those writers of whose overpossession by form I have complained. Here, however, all this elaboration comes from a very different motive, and leads to other ends. There is such a thing as perfecting form that form may be annihilated. All the art of Verlaine is in bringing verse to a bird's song, the art of Mallarmé in bringing verse to the song of an orchestra. In Villiers de l'Isle-Adam drama becomes an embodiment of spiritual forces, in Maeterlinck not even their embodiment, but the remote sound of their voices. It is all an attempt to spiritualise literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority. Description is banished that beautiful things may be evoked, magically; the regular beat of verse is broken in order that words may fly, upon subtler wings.

Mystery is no longer feared, as the great mystery in whose midst we are islanded was feared by those to whom that unknown sea was only a great void. We are coming closer to nature, as we seem to shrink from it with something of horror, disdaining to catalogue the trees of the forest. And as we brush aside the accidents of daily life, in which men and women imagine that they are alone touching reality, we come closer to humanity, to everything in humanity that may have begun before the world and may outlast it.

Here, then, in this revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition; in this endeavour to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul, of whatever exists and can be realised by the consciousness; in this dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible; literature, bowed down by so many burdens, may at last attain liberty, and its authentic speech. In attaining this liberty, it accepts a heavier burden; for in speaking to us so intimately, so solemnly, as only religion had hitherto spoken to us, it becomes itself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual.

GÉRARD DE NERVAL



## GÉRARD DE NERVAL

### I

THIS is the problem of one who lost the whole world and gained his own soul.

"I like to arrange my life as if it were a novel," wrote Gérard de Nerval, and, indeed, it is somewhat difficult to disentangle the precise facts of an existence which was never quite conscious where began and where ended that "overflowing of dreams into real life," of which he speaks. "I do not ask of God," he said, "that he should change anything in events themselves, but that he should change me in regard to things, so that I might have the power to create my own universe about me, to govern my dreams, instead of enduring them." The prayer was not granted, in its entirety; and the tragedy of his life lay in the vain endeavour to hold back the irresistible empire of the unseen, which it was the joy of his life to summon about

#### 14 THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT

him. Briefly, we know that Gérard Labrunie (the name de Nerval was taken from a little piece of property, worth some 1500 francs, which he liked to imagine had always been in the possession of his family) was born at Paris, May 22, 1808. His father was surgeon-major; his mother died before he was old enough to remember her, following the *Grande Armée* on the Russian campaign; and Gérard was brought up, largely under the care of a studious and erratic uncle, in a little village called Montagny, near Ermenonville. He was a precocious schoolboy, and by the age of eighteen had published six little collections of verses. It was during one of his holidays that he saw, for the first and last time, the young girl whom he calls Adrienne, and whom, under many names, he loved to the end of his life. One evening she had come from the château to dance with the young peasant girls on the grass. She had danced with Gérard, he had kissed her cheek, he had crowned her hair with laurels, he had heard her sing an old song telling of the sorrows of a princess whom her father had shut in a tower because she had loved. To Gérard it seemed that already he remembered her, and certainly he was never to forget her. Afterwards, he heard that Adrienne had taken the

veil; then, that she was dead. To one who had realised that it is "we, the living, who walk in a world of phantoms," death could not exclude hope; and when, many years later, he fell seriously and fantastically in love with a little actress called Jenny Colon, it was because he seemed to have found, in that blonde and very human person, the re-incarnation of the blonde Adrienne.

Meanwhile Gérard was living in Paris, among his friends the Romantics, writing and living in an equally desultory fashion. *Le bon Gérard* was the best loved, and, in his time, not the least famous, of the company. He led, by choice, now in Paris, now across Europe, the life of a vagabond, and more persistently than others of his friends who were driven to it by need. At that time, when it was the aim of every one to be as eccentric as possible, the eccentricities of Gérard's life and thought seemed, on the whole, less noticeable than those of many really quite normal persons. But with Gérard there was no pose; and when, one day, he was found in the Palais-Royal, leading a lobster at the end of a blue ribbon, the visionary had simply lost control of his visions, and had to be sent to Dr. Blanche's asylum at Montmartre. He entered March 21, 1841, and

came out, apparently well again, on the 21st of November. It would seem that this first access of madness was, to some extent, the consequence of the final rupture with Jenny Colon; on June 5, 1842, she died, and it was partly in order to put as many leagues of the earth as possible between him and that memory that Gérard set out, at the end of 1842, for the East. It was also in order to prove to the world, by his consciousness of external things, that he had recovered his reason. While he was in Syria, he once more fell in love with a new incarnation of Adrienne, a young Druse, Saléma, the daughter of a Sheikh of Lebanon; and it seems to have been almost by accident that he did not marry her. He returned to Paris at the end of 1843 or the beginning of 1844, and for the next few years he lived mostly in Paris, writing charming, graceful, remarkably sane articles and books, and wandering about the streets, by day and night, in a perpetual dream, from which, now and again, he was somewhat rudely awakened. When, in the spring of 1853, he went to see Heine, for whom he was doing an admirable prose translation of his poems, and told him he had come to return the money he had received in advance, because the times were accomplished, and the end of the world,



announced by the Apocalypse, was at hand, Heine sent for a cab, and Gérard found himself at Dr. Dubois' asylum, where he remained two months. It was on coming out of the asylum that he wrote *Sylvie*, a delightful idyl, chiefly autobiographical, one of his three actual achievements. On August 27, 1853, he had to be taken to Dr. Blanche's asylum at Passy, where he remained till May 27, 1854. Thither, after a month or two spent in Germany, he returned on August 8, and on October 19 he came out for the last time, manifestly uncured. He was now engaged on the narrative of his own madness, and the first part of *Le Rêve et la Vie* appeared in the *Revue de Paris* of January 1, 1855. On the 20th he came into the office of the review, and showed Gautier and Maxime du Camp an apron-string which he was carrying in his pocket. "It is the girdle," he said, "that Madame de Maintenon wore when she had *Esther* performed at Saint-Cyr." On the 24th he wrote to a friend: "Come and prove my identity at the police-station of the Châtelet." The night before he had been working at his MS. in a pot-house of Les Halles, and had been arrested as a vagabond. He was used to such little misadventures, but he complained of the difficulty of writing. "I set off after an

idea," he said, "and lose myself, I am hours in finding my way back. Do you know I can scarcely write twenty lines a day, the darkness comes about me so close!" He took out the apron-string. "It is the garter of the Queen of Sheba," he said. The snow was freezing on the ground, and on the night of the 25th, at three in the morning, the landlord of a "penny doss" in the Rue de la Vieille-Lanterne, a filthy alley lying between the quays and the Rue de Rivoli, heard some one knocking at the door, but did not open, on account of the cold. At dawn, the body of Gérard de Nerval was found hanging by the apron-string to a bar of the window.

It is not necessary to exaggerate the importance of the half-dozen volumes which make up the works of Gérard de Nerval. He was not a great writer; he had moments of greatness; and it is the particular quality of these moments which is of interest for us. There is the entertaining, but not more than entertaining, *Voyage en Orient*; there is the estimable translation of *Faust*, and the admirable versions from Heine; there are the volumes of short stories and sketches, of which even *Les Illuminés*, in spite of the promise of its title, is little more than an agreeable compilation.

But there remain three compositions : the sonnets, *Le Rêve et la Vie*, and *Sylvie*; of which *Sylvie* is the most objectively achieved, a wandering idyl, full of pastoral delight, and containing some folk-songs of Valois, two of which have been translated by Rossetti; *Le Rêve et la Vie* being the most intensely personal, a narrative of madness, unique as madness itself; and the sonnets, a kind of miracle, which may be held to have created something at least of the method of the later Symbolists. These three compositions, in which alone Gérard is his finest self, all belong to the periods when he was, in the eyes of the world, actually mad. The sonnets belong to two of these periods, *Le Rêve et la Vie* to the last; *Sylvie* was written in the short interval between the two attacks in the early part of 1853. We have thus the case of a writer, graceful and elegant when he is sane, but only inspired, only really wise, passionate, collected, only really master of himself, when he is insane. It may be worth looking at a few of the points which so suggestive a problem presents to us.

## II

Gérard de Nerval lived the transfigured inner life of the dreamer. "I was very tired of life!" he says. And like so many dreamers, who have all the luminous darkness of the universe in their brains, he found his most precious and uninterrupted solitude in the crowded and more sordid streets of great cities. He who had loved the Queen of Sheba, and seen the seven Elohim dividing the world, could find nothing more tolerable in mortal conditions, when he was truly aware of them, than the company of the meanest of mankind, in whom poverty and vice, and the hard pressure of civilisation, still leave some of the original vivacity of the human comedy. The real world seeming to be always so far from him, and a sort of terror of the gulfs holding him, in spite of himself, to its flying skirts, he found something at all events realisable, concrete, in these drinkers of Les Halles, these vagabonds of the Place du Carrousel, among whom he so often sought refuge. It was literally, in part, a refuge. During the day he could sleep, but night wakened him, and that

restlessness, which the night draws out in those who are really under lunar influences, set his feet wandering, if only in order that his mind might wander the less. The sun, as he mentions, never appears in dreams; but, with the approach of night, is not every one a little readier to believe in the mystery lurking behind the world?

*Grains, dans le mur aveugle, un regard qui t'épie !*

he writes in one of his great sonnets; and that fear of the invisible watchfulness of nature was never absent from him. It is one of the terrors of human existence that we may be led at once to seek and to shun solitude; unable to bear the mortal pressure of its embrace, unable to endure the nostalgia of its absence. "I think man's happiest when he forgets himself," says an Elizabethan dramatist; and, with Gérard, there was Adrienne to forget, and Jenny Colon the actress, and the Queen of Sheba. But to have drunk of the cup of dreams is to have drunk of the cup of eternal memory. The past, and, as it seemed to him, the future were continually with him; only the present fled continually from under his feet. It was only by the effort of this contact with people who lived so sincerely in the day, the minute, that

he could find even a temporary foothold. With them, at least, he could hold back all the stars, and the darkness beyond them, and the interminable approach and disappearance of all the ages, if only for the space between tavern and tavern, where he could open his eyes on so frank an abandonment to the common drunkenness of most people in this world, here for once really living the symbolic intoxication of their ignorance.

Like so many dreamers of illimitable dreams, it was the fate of Gérard to incarnate his ideal in the person of an actress. The fatal transfiguration of the footlights, in which reality and the artificial change places with so fantastic a regularity, has *drawn many moths into its flame, and will draw more*, as long as men persist in demanding illusion of what is real, and reality in what is illusion. The Jenny Colons of the world are very simple, very real, if one will but refrain from assuming them to be a mystery. But it is the penalty of all imaginative lovers to create for themselves the veil which hides from them the features of the beloved. It is their privilege, for it is incomparably more entrancing to fancy oneself in love with Isis than to know that one is in love with Manon Lescaut. The picture of Gérard, after many hesitations,

revealing to the astonished Jenny that she is the incarnation of another, the shadow of a dream, that she has been Adrienne and is about to be the Queen of Sheba; her very human little cry of pure incomprehension, *Mais vous ne m'aimez pas!* and her prompt refuge in the arms of the *jeune premier ridé*, if it were not of the acutest pathos, would certainly be of the most quintessential comedy! For Gérard, so sharp an awakening was but like the passage from one state to another, across that little bridge of one step which lies between heaven and hell, to which he was so used in his dreams. It gave permanency to the trivial, crystallising it, in another than Stendhal's sense; and when death came, changing mere human memory into the terms of eternity, the darkness of the spiritual world was lit with a new star, which was henceforth the wandering, desolate guide of so many visions. The tragic figure of Aurélia, which comes and goes through all the labyrinths of dream, is now seen always "as if lit up by a lightning-flash, pale and dying, hurried away by dark horsemen."

The dream or doctrine of the re-incarnation of souls, which has given so much consolation to so many questioners of eternity, was for Gérard (need

we doubt?) a dream rather than a doctrine, but one of those dreams which are nearer to a man than his breath. "This vague and hopeless love," he writes in *Sylvie*, "inspired by an actress, which night by night took hold of me at the hour of the performance, leaving me only at the hour of sleep, had its germ in the recollection of Adrienne, flower of the night, unfolding under the pale rays of the moon, rosy and blonde phantom, gliding over the green grass, half bathed in white mist. . . . To love a nun under the form of an actress! . . . and if it were the very same! It is enough to drive one mad!" Yes, *il y a de quoi devenir fou*, as Gérard had found; but there was also, in this intimate sense of the unity, perpetuity, and harmoniously recurring rhythm of nature, not a little of the inner substance of wisdom. It was a dream, perhaps refracted from some broken, illuminating angle by which madness catches unseen light, that revealed to him the meaning of his own superstition, fatality, malady:—"During my sleep, I had a marvellous vision. It seemed to me that the goddess appeared before me, saying to me: 'I am the same as Mary, the same as thy mother, the same also whom, under all forms, thou hast always loved. At each of thine ordeals I have dropt yet



one more of the masks with which I veil my countenance, and soon thou shalt see me as I am!" And in perhaps his finest sonnet, the mysterious *Artémis*, we have, under other symbols, and with the deliberate inconsequence of these sonnets, the comfort and despair of the same faith.

*La Treizième revient . . . C'est encor la première ;  
Et c'est toujours la seule,—ou c'est le seul moment :  
Car es-tu reine, ô toi ! la première ou dernière ?  
Es-tu roi, toi le seul ou le dernier amant ? . . .*

*Aimez qui vous aime du berceau dans la bière ;  
Celle que j'aimai seul m'aime encor tendrement ;  
C'est la mort—ou la morte . . . Ô déluge ! ô tourment !  
La Rose qu'elle tient, c'est la Rose trémière.*

*Sainte napolitaine aux mains pleines de feux,  
Rose au cœur violet, fleur de sainte Gudule :  
As-tu trouvé ta croix dans le désert des cioux ?*

*Roses blanches, tombez ! vous insultez nos dieux :  
Tombez, fantômes blancs, de votre ciel qui brûle :  
—La Sainte de l'abîme est plus sainte à mes yeux !*

Who has not often meditated, above all what artist, on the slightness, after all, of the link which holds our faculties together in that sober health of the brain which we call reason? Are there not moments when that link seems to be worn down to

so fine a tenuity that the wing of a passing dream might suffice to snap it? The consciousness seems, as it were, to expand and contract at once, into something too wide for the universe, and too narrow for the thought of self to find room within it. Is it that the sense of identity is about to evaporate, annihilating all, or is it that a more profound identity, the identity of the whole sentient universe, has been at last realised? Leaving the concrete world on these brief voyages, the fear is that we may not have strength to return, or that we may lose the way back. Every artist lives a double life, in which he is for the most part conscious of the illusions of the imagination. He is conscious also of the illusions of the nerves, which he shares with every man of imaginative mind. Nights of insomnia, days of anxious waiting, the sudden shock of an event, any one of these common disturbances may be enough to jangle the tuneless bells of one's nerves. The artist can distinguish these causes of certain of his moods from those other causes which come to him because he is an artist, and are properly concerned with that invention which is his own function. Yet is there not some danger that he may come to confuse one with the other, that he may "lose the thread" which

conducts him through the intricacies of the inner world ?

The supreme artist, certainly, is the furthest of all men from this danger ; for he is the supreme intelligence. Like Dante, he can pass through hell unsinged. With him, imagination is vision ; when he looks into the darkness, he sees. The vague dreamer, the insecure artist and the uncertain mystic at once, sees only shadows, not recognising their outlines. He is mastered by the images which have come at his call ; he has not the power which chains them for his slaves. "The kingdom of Heaven suffers violence," and the dreamer who has gone tremblingly into the darkness is in peril at the hands of those very real phantoms who are the reflection of his fear.

The madness of Gérard de Nerval, whatever physiological reasons may be rightly given for its outbreak, subsidence, and return, I take to have been essentially due to the weakness and not the excess of his visionary quality, to the insufficiency of his imaginative energy, and to his lack of spiritual discipline. He was an unsystematic mystic ; his "Tower of Babel in two hundred volumes," that medley of books of religion, science, astrology, history, travel, which he thought would have

## 28 THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT

rejoiced the heart of Pico della Mirandola, of Meursius, or of Nicholas of Cusa, was truly, as he says, "enough to drive a wise man mad." "Why not also," he adds, "enough to make a madman wise?" But precisely because it was this *amas bizarre*, this jumble of the perilous secrets in which wisdom is so often folly, and folly so often wisdom. He speaks vaguely of the Kabbala; the Kabbala would have been safety to him, as the Catholic Church would have been, or any other reasoned scheme of things. Wavering among intuitions, ignorances, half-truths, shadows of falsehood, now audacious, now hesitating, he was blown hither and thither by conflicting winds, a prey to the indefinite.

*Le Rêve et la Vie*, the last fragments of which were found in his pockets after his suicide, scrawled on scraps of paper, interrupted with Kabbalistic signs and "a demonstration of the Immaculate Conception by geometry," is a narrative of a madman's visions by the madman himself, yet showing, as Gautier says, "cold reason seated by the bedside of hot fever, hallucination analysing itself by a supreme philosophic effort." What is curious, yet after all natural, is that part of the narrative seems to be contemporaneous with what it

describes, and part subsequent to it ; so that it is not as when De Quincey says to us, such or such was the opium-dream that I had on such a night ; but as if the opium-dreamer had begun to write down his dream while he was yet within its coils. "The descent into hell," he calls it twice ; yet does he not also write : "At times I imagined that my force and my activity were doubled ; it seemed to me that I knew everything, understood everything ; and imagination brought me infinite pleasures. Now that I have recovered what men call reason, must I not regret having lost them ?" But he had not lost them ; he was still in that state of double consciousness which he describes in one of his visions, when, seeing people dressed in white, "I was astonished," he says, "to see them all dressed in white ; yet it seemed to me that this was an optical illusion." His cosmical visions are at times so magnificent that he seems to be creating myths ; and it is with a worthy ingenuity that he plays the part he imagines to be assigned to him in his astral influences.

"First of all I imagined that the persons collected in the garden (of the madhouse) all had some influence on the stars, and that the one who always walked round and round in a circle regulated the

course of the sun. An old man, who was brought there at certain hours of the day, and who made knots as he consulted his watch, seemed to me to be charged with the notation of the course of the hours. I attributed to myself an influence over the course of the moon, and I believed that this star had been struck by the thunderbolt of the Most High, which had traced on its face the imprint of the mask which I had observed.

"I attributed a mystical signification to the conversations of the warders and of my companions. It seemed to me that they were the representatives of all the races of the earth, and that we had undertaken between us to re-arrange the course of the stars, and to give a wider development to the system. An error, in my opinion, had crept into the general combination of numbers, and thence came all the ills of humanity. I believed also that the celestial spirits had taken human forms, and assisted at this general congress, seeming though they did to be concerned with but ordinary occupations. My own part seemed to me to be the re-establishment of universal harmony by Kabbalistic art, and I had to seek a solution by evoking the occult forces of various religions."

So far we have, no doubt, the confusions of

madness, in which what may indeed be the symbol is taken for the thing itself. But now observe what follows :—

“I seemed to myself a hero living under the very eyes of the gods; everything in nature assumed new aspects, and secret voices came to me from the plants, the trees, animals, the meanest insects, to warn and to encourage me. The words of my companions had mysterious messages, the sense of which I alone understood; things without form and without life lent themselves to the designs of my mind; out of combinations of stones, the figures of angles, crevices, or openings, the shape of leaves, out of colours, odours, and sounds, I saw unknown harmonies come forth. ‘How is it,’ I said to myself, ‘that I can possibly have lived so long outside nature, without identifying myself with her! All things live, all things are in motion, all things correspond; the magnetic rays emanating from myself or others traverse without obstacle the infinite chain of created things: a transparent network covers the world, whose loose threads communicate more and more closely with the planets and the stars. Now, a captive upon the earth, I hold converse with the starry choir, which is feelingly a part of my joys and sorrows.’”

To have thus realised that central secret of the mystics, from Pythagoras onwards, the secret which the Smaragdine Tablet of Hermes betrays in its "As things are below, so are they above"; which Boehme has classed in his teaching of "signatures," and Swedenborg has systematised in his doctrine of "correspondences"; does it matter very much that he arrived at it by way of the obscure and fatal initiation of madness? Truth, and especially that soul of truth which is poetry, may be reached by many roads; and a road is not necessarily misleading because it is dangerous or forbidden. Here is one who has gazed at light till it has blinded him; and for us all that is important is that he has seen something, not that his eyesight has been too weak to endure the pressure of light overflowing the world from beyond the world.

### III

And here we arrive at the fundamental principle which is at once the substance and the æsthetics of the sonnets "composed," as he explains, "in that state of meditation which the Germans would call



'super-naturalistic.'” In one, which I will quote, he is explicit, and seems to state a doctrine.

VERS DORÉS,

*Homme, libre penseur ! te crois-tu seul pensant  
Dans ce monde où la vie éclate en toute chose ?  
Des forces que tu tiens ta liberté dispose,  
Mais de tous tes conseils l'univers est absent.*

*Respecte dans la bête un esprit agissant :  
Chaque fleur est une âme à la Nature éclosé ;  
Un mystère d'amour dans le métal repose ;  
“ Tout est sensible ! ” Et tout sur ton être est puissant.*

*Crains, dans le mur aveugle, un regard qui l'épie !  
A la matière même un verbe est attaché . . .  
Ne la fais pas servir à quelque usage impie !*

*Souvent dans l'être obscur habite un Dieu caché ;  
Et comme un œil naissant couvert par ses paupières,  
Un pur esprit s'accroît sous l'écorce des pierres !*

But in the other sonnets, in *Artémis*, which I have quoted, in *El Desdichado*, *Myrtho*, and the others, he would seem to be deliberately obscure; or at least, his obscurity results, to some extent, from the state of mind which he describes in *Le Rêve et la Vie*: “I then saw, vaguely drifting into form, plastic images of antiquity, which outlined themselves, became definite, and seemed to represent

symbols, of which I only seized the idea with difficulty." Nothing could more precisely represent the impression made by these sonnets, in which, for the first time in French, words are used as the ingredients of an evocation, as themselves not merely colour and sound, but symbol. Here are words which create an atmosphere by the actual suggestive quality of their syllables, as, according to the theory of Mallarmé, they should do ; as, in the recent attempts of the Symbolists, writer after writer has endeavoured to lure them into doing. Persuaded, as Gérard was, of the sensitive unity of all nature, he was able to trace resemblances where others saw only divergences ; and the setting together of unfamiliar and apparently alien things, which comes so strangely upon us in his verse, was perhaps an actual sight of what it is our misfortune not to see. His genius, to which madness had come as the liberating, the precipitating, spirit, disengaging its finer essence, consisted in a power of materialising vision, whatever is most volatile and unseizable in vision, and without losing the sense of mystery, or that quality which gives its charm to the intangible. Madness, then, in him, had lit up, as if by lightning-flashes, the hidden links of distant and divergent things ; perhaps in some-

what the same manner as that in which a similarly new, startling, perhaps over-true sight of things is gained by the artificial stimulation of haschisch, opium, and those other drugs by which vision is produced deliberately, and the soul, sitting safe within the perilous circle of its own magic, looks out on the panorama which either rises out of the darkness before it, or drifts from itself into the darkness. The very imagery of these sonnets is the imagery which is known to all dreamers of bought dreams. *Rose au cœur violet, fleur de sainte Gudule; le Temple au péristyle immense; la grotte où nage la syrène*: the dreamer of bought dreams has seen them all. But no one before Gérard realised that such things as these might be the basis of almost a new æsthetics. Did he himself realise all that he had done, or was it left for Mallarmé to theorise upon what Gérard had but divined?

That he made the discovery, there is no doubt; and we owe to the fortunate accident of madness one of the foundations of what may be called the practical æsthetics of Symbolism. 'Look again at that sonnet *Artémis*, and you will see in it not only the method of Mallarmé, but much of the most intimate manner of Verlaine. 'The first four lines,

### 36 THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT

with their fluid rhythm, their repetitions and echoes, their delicate evasions, might have been written by Verlaine; in the later part the firmness of the rhythms and the jewelled significance of the words are like Mallarmé at his finest, so that in a single sonnet we may fairly claim to see a foreshadowing of the styles of Mallarmé and Verlaine at once. With Verlaine the resemblance goes, perhaps, no further; with Mallarmé it goes to the very roots, the whole man being, certainly, his style.

Gerard de Nerval, then, had divined, before all the world, that poetry should be a miracle; not a hymn to beauty, nor the description of beauty, nor beauty's mirror; but beauty itself, the colour, fragrance, and form of the imagined flower, as it blossoms again out of the page. Vision, the overpowering vision, had come to him beyond, if not against, his will; and he knew that vision is the root out of which the flower must grow. Vision had taught him symbol, and he knew that it is by symbol alone that the flower can take visible form. He knew that the whole mystery of beauty can never be comprehended by the crowd, and that while clearness is a virtue of style, perfect explicitness is not a necessary virtue. So it was with disdain, as well as with confidence, that he allowed

| these sonnets to be overheard. It was enough for him to say :—

*J'ai rêvé dans la grotte où nage la sirène ;*

and to speak, it might be, the siren's language, remembering her. "It will be my last madness," he wrote, "to believe myself a poet : let criticism cure me of it." Criticism, in his own day, even Gautier's criticism, could but be disconcerted by a novelty so unexampled. It is only now that the best critics in France are beginning to realise how great in themselves, and how great in their influence, are these sonnets, which, forgotten by the world for nearly fifty years, have all the while been secretly bringing new æsthetics into French poetry.



VILLIERS DE L'ISLE-ADAM





## VILLIERS DE L'ISLE-ADAM

*A chacun son infini*

### I

COUNT PHILIPPE AUGUSTE MATHIAS DE VILLIERS DE L'ISLE-ADAM was born at St. Brieuc, in Normandy, November 28, 1838; he died at Paris, under the care of the Frères Saint-Jean-de-Dieu, August 19, 1889. Even before his death, his life had become a legend, and the legend is even now not to be disentangled from the actual occurrences of an existence so heroically visionary. The Don Quixote of idealism, it was not only in philosophical terms that life, to him, was the dream, and the spiritual world the reality; he lived his faith, enduring what others called reality with contempt, whenever, for a moment, he became conscious of it. The basis of the character of Villiers was pride, and it was a pride which covered more

than the universe. And this pride, first of all, was the pride of race.

Descendant of the original Rodolphe le Bel, Seigneur de Villiers (1067), through Jean de Villiers and Marie de l'Isle and their son Pierre the first Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, a Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, born in 1384, had been Marshal of France under Jean-sans-Peur, Duke of Burgundy ; he took Paris during the civil war, and after being imprisoned in the Bastille, reconquered Pontoise from the English, and helped to reconquer Paris. Another Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, born in 1464, Grand Master of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, defended Rhodes against 200,000 Turks for a whole year, in one of the most famous sieges in history ; it was he who obtained from Charles V. the concession of the isle of Malta for his Order, henceforth the Order of the Knights of Malta.

For Villiers, to whom time, after all, was but a metaphysical abstraction, the age of the Crusaders had not passed. From a descendant of the Grand Master of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, the nineteenth century demanded precisely the virtues which the sixteenth century had demanded of that ancestor. And these virtues were all summed up in one word, which, in its double significance,

single to him, covered the whole attitude of life: the word "nobility." No word returns oftener to the lips in speaking of what is most characteristic in his work, and to Villiers moral and spiritual nobility seemed but the inevitable consequence of that other kind of nobility by which he seemed to himself still a Knight of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. It was his birthright.

To the aristocratic conception of things, nobility of soul is indeed a birthright, and the pride with which this gift of nature is accepted is a pride of exactly the opposite kind to that democratic pride to which nobility of soul is a conquest, valuable in proportion to its difficulty. This duality, always essentially aristocratic and democratic, typically Eastern and Western also, finds its place in every theory of religion, philosophy, and the ideal life. The pride of *being*, the pride of *becoming*: these are the two ultimate contradictions set before every idealist. Villiers' choice, inevitable indeed, was significant. In its measure, it must always be the choice of the artist, to whom, in his contemplation of life, the means is often so much more important than the end. That nobility of soul which comes without effort, which comes only with an unrelaxed diligence over oneself, that I should be I: there

can at least be no comparison of its beauty with the stained and dusty onslaught on a never quite conquered fort of the enemy, in a divided self. And, if it be permitted to choose among degrees of sanctity, that, surely, is the highest in which a natural genius for such things accepts its own attainment with the simplicity of a birthright.

And the Catholicism of Villiers was also a part of his inheritance. His ancestors had fought for the Church, and Catholicism was still a pompous flag, under which it was possible to fight on behalf of the spirit, against that materialism which is always, in one way or another, atheist. Thus he dedicates one of his stories to the Pope, chooses ecclesiastical splendours by preference among the many splendours of the world which go to make up his stage-pictures, and is learned in the subtleties of the Fathers. The Church is his favourite symbol of austere intellectual beauty ; one way, certainly, by which the temptations of external matter may be vanquished, and a way, also, by which the desire of worship may be satisfied.

But there was also, in his attitude towards the mysteries of the spiritual world, that " forbidden " curiosity which had troubled the obedience of the Templars, and which came to him, too, as a kind of

knightly quality. Whether or not he was actually a Kabbalist, questions of magic began, at an early age, to preoccupy him, and, from the first wild experiment of *Isis* to the deliberate summing up of *Axel*, the "occult" world finds its way into most of his pages.

Fundamentally, the belief of Villiers is the belief common to all Eastern mystics.\* "Know, once for all, that there is for thee no other universe than that conception thereof which is reflected at the bottom of thy thoughts" "What is knowledge but a recognition?" Therefore, "forgetting for ever that which was the illusion of thyself," hasten to become "an intelligence freed from the bonds and the desires of the present moment." "Become the flower of thyself! Thou art but what thou thinkest: therefore think thyself eternal." "Man, if thou cease to limit in thyself a thing, that is, to desire it, if, so doing, thou withdraw thyself from it, it will follow thee, woman-like, as the water fills the place that is offered to it in the hollow of the hand. For thou possessest the real being of all things, in thy pure will, and thou art the God that thou art able to become."

\* "I am far from sure," wrote Verlaine, "that the philosophy of Villiers will not one day become the formula of our century."

## 46 THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT

To have accepted the doctrine which thus finds expression in *Axel*, is to have accepted this among others of its consequences : " Science states, but does not explain : she is the oldest offspring of the chimeras ; all the chimeras, then, on the same terms as the world (the oldest of them !), are *something more* than nothing !" And in *Elen* there is a fragment of conversation between two young students, which has its significance also :

*Goetze.* There's my philosopher in full flight to the regions of the sublime ! Happily we have Science, which is a torch, dear mystic ; we will analyse your sun, if the planet does not burst into pieces sooner than it has any right to !

*Samuel.* Science will not suffice Sooner or later you will end by coming to your knees.

*Goetze.* Before what ?

*Samuel.* Before the darkness ! "

Such avowals of ignorance are possible only from the height of a great intellectual pride. Villiers' revolt against Science, so far as Science is materialistic, and his passionate curiosity in that chimera's flight towards the invisible, are one and the same impulse of a mind to which only mind

is interesting. *Toute cette vieille Extériorité, maligne, compliquée, inflexible*, that illusion which Science accepts for the one reality : it must be the whole effort of one's consciousness to escape from its entanglements, to dominate it, or to ignore it, and one's art must be the building of an ideal world beyond its access, from which one may indeed sally out, now and again, in a desperate enough attack upon the illusions in the midst of which men live.

And just that, we find, makes up the work of Villiers, work which divides itself roughly into two divisions : one, the ideal world, or the ideal in the world (*Axel, Elen, Morgane, Isis*, some of the *contes*, and, intermediary, *La Révolte*) ; the other, satire, the mockery of reality (*L'Eve Future*, the *Contes Cruels, Tribulat Bonhomet*). It is part of the originality of Villiers that the two divisions constantly flow into one another ; the idealist being never more the idealist than in his buffooneries.

## II

*Axel* is the Symbolist drama, in all its unpromising conflict with the "modesty" of Nature and the limitations of the stage. It is the drama of the soul, and at the same time it is the most pictorial of dramas; I should define its manner as a kind of spiritual romanticism. The earlier dramas, *Elén*, *Morgane*, are fixed at somewhat the same point in space; *La Révolte*, which seems to anticipate *The Dolls' House*, shows us an aristocratic Ibsen, touching reality with a certain disdain, certainly with far less skill, certainly with far more beauty. But *Axel*, meditated over during a lifetime, shows us Villiers' ideal of his own idealism.

The action takes place, it is true, in this century, but it takes place in corners of the world into which the modern spirit has not yet passed; this *Monastère de Religieuses-trinitaires, le cloître de Sainte Apollodora, situé sur les confins du littoral de l'ancienne Flandre française*, and the *très vieux château fort, le burg des margraves d'Auersperg, isolé au milieu du Schwarzwald*. The characters, Axel d'Auersperg, Eve Sara Emmanuèle de Maupers,



Maître Janus, the Archidiacre, the Commandeur Kaspar d'Auërsperg, are at once more and less than human beings: they are the types of different ideals, and they are clothed with just enough humanity to give form to what would otherwise remain disembodied spirit. The religious ideal, the occult ideal, the worldly ideal, the passionate ideal, are all presented, one after the other, in these dazzling and profound pages; Axël is the disdainful choice from among them, the disdainful rejection of life itself, of the whole illusion of life, "since infinity alone is not a deception." And Sara? Sara is a superb part of that life which is rejected, which she herself comes, not without reluctance, to reject. In that motionless figure, during the whole of the first act silent but for a single "No," and leaping into a moment's violent action as the act closes, she is the haughtiest woman in literature. But she is a woman, and she desires life, finding it in Axël. Pride, and the woman's devotion to the man, aid her to take the last cold step with Axël, in that transcendental giving up of life at the moment when life becomes ideal.

And the play is written, throughout, with a curious solemnity, a particular kind of eloquence,

which makes no attempt to imitate the level of the speech of every day, but which is a sort of ideal language in which beauty is aimed at as exclusively as if it were written in verse. The modern drama, under the democratic influence of Ibsen, the positive influence of Dumas *fils*, has limited itself to the expression of temperaments in the one case, of theoretic intelligences in the other, in as nearly as possible the words which the average man would use for the statement of his emotions and ideas. The form, that is, is degraded below the level of the characters whom it attempts to express; for it is evident that the average man can articulate only a small enough part of what he obscurely feels or thinks; and the theory of Realism is that his emotions and ideas are to be given only in so far as the words at his own command can give them. Villiers, choosing to concern himself only with exceptional characters, and with them only in the absolute, invents for them a more elaborate and a more magnificent speech than they would naturally employ, the speech of their thoughts, of their dreams.

And it is a world thought or dreamt in some more fortunate atmosphere than that in which we live, that Villiers has created for the final achieve-

ment of his abstract ideas. I do not doubt that he himself always lived in it, through all the poverty of the precipitous Rue des Martyrs. But it is in *Axël*, and in *Axël* only, that he has made us also inhabitants of that world. Even in *Elén* we are spectators, watching a tragical fairy play (as if *Fantasio* became suddenly in deadly earnest), watching some one else's dreams. *Axël* envelops us in its own atmosphere; it is as if we found ourselves on a mountain-top, on the other side of the clouds, and without surprise at finding ourselves there.

The ideal, to Villiers, being the real, spiritual beauty being the essential beauty, and material beauty its reflection, or its revelation, it is with a sort of fury that he attacks the materialising forces of the world: science, progress, the worldly emphasis on "facts," on what is "positive," "serious," "respectable." Satire, with him, is the revenge of beauty upon ugliness, the persecution of the ugly; it is not merely social satire, it is a satire on the material universe by one who believes in a spiritual universe. Thus it is the only laughter of our time which is fundamental, as fundamental as that of Swift or Rabelais. And this lacerating laughter of the idealist is never surer in its aim than when it turns the arms of science against itself, as in the

vast buffoonery of *L'Eve Future*. A Parisian wit, sharpened to a fineness of irony such as only wit which is also philosophy can attain, brings in another method of attack ; humour, which is almost English, another ; while again satire becomes tragic, fantastic, macabre. In those enigmatic "tales of the grotesque and arabesque," in which Villiers rivals Poe on his own ground, there is, for the most part, a multiplicity of meaning which is, as it is meant to be, disconcerting. I should not like to say how far Villiers does not, sometimes, believe in his own magic.

It is characteristic of him, at all events, that he employs what we call the supernatural alike in his works of pure idealism and in his works of sheer satire. The moment the world ceased to be the stable object, solidly encrusted with houses in brick and stone, which it is to most of its so temporary inhabitants, Villiers was at home. When he sought the absolute beauty, it was beyond the world that he found it ; when he sought horror, it was a breath blowing from an invisible darkness which brought it to his nerves ; when he desired to mock the pretensions of knowledge or of ignorance, it was always with the unseen that his tragic buffoonery made familiar.

There is, in everything which Villiers wrote, a strangeness, certainly both instinctive and deliberate, which seems to me to be the natural consequence of that intellectual pride which, as I have pointed out, was at the basis of his character. He hated every kind of mediocrity : therefore he chose to analyse exceptional souls, to construct exceptional stories, to invent splendid names, and to evoke singular landscapes. It was part of his curiosity in souls to prefer the complex to the simple, the perverse to the straightforward, the ambiguous to either. His heroes are incarnations of spiritual pride, and their tragedies are the shock of spirit against matter, the invasion of spirit by matter, the temptation of spirit by spiritual evil. They seek the absolute, and find death ; they seek wisdom, find love, and fall into spiritual decay ; they seek reality, and find crime ; they seek phantoms, and find themselves. They are on the borders of a wisdom too great for their capacity ; they are haunted by dark powers, instincts of ambiguous passions ; they are too lucid to be quite sane in their extravagances ; they have not quite systematically transposed their dreams into action. And his heroines, when they are not, like *L'Eve Future*, the vitalised mechanism of an Edison, have

the solemnity of dead people, and a hieratic speech. *Songe, des cœurs condamnés à ce supplice, de ne pas m'aimer !* says Sara, in *Axel*. *Je ne l'aime pas, ce jeune homme. Qu'ai-je donc fait à Dieu ?* says Elen. And their voice is always like the voice of Elen : "I listened attentively to the sound of her voice ; it was taciturn, subdued, like the murmur of the river Lethe, flowing through the region of shadows." They have the immortal weariness of beauty, they are enigmas to themselves, they desire, and know not why they refrain, they do good and evil with the lifting of an eyelid, and are innocent and guilty of all the sins of the earth.

And these strange inhabitants move in as strange a world. They are the princes and châtelaines of ancient castles lost in the depths of the Black Forest ; they are the last descendants of a great race about to come to an end ; students of magic, who have the sharp and swift swords of the soldier ; enigmatic courtesans, at the table of strange feasts ; they find incalculable treasures, *tonnantes et sonnantes cataractes d'or liquide*, only to disdain them. All the pomp of the world approaches them, that they may the better abnegate it, or that it may ruin them to a deeper degree of their material hell. And we see them

always at the moment of a crisis, before the two ways of a decision, hesitating in the entanglements of a great temptation. And this casuist of souls will drag forth some horribly stunted or horribly overgrown soul from under its obscure covering, setting it to dance naked before our eyes. He has no mercy on those who have no mercy on themselves.

In the sense in which that word is ordinarily used, Villiers has no pathos. This is enough to explain why he can never, in the phrase he would have disliked so greatly, "touch the popular heart." His mind is too abstract to contain pity, and it is in his lack of pity that he seems to put himself outside humanity. *A chacun son infini*, he has said, and in the avidity of his search for the infinite he has no mercy for the blind weakness which goes stumbling over the earth, without so much as knowing that the sun and stars are overhead. He sees only the gross multitude, the multitude which has the contentment of the slave. He cannot pardon stupidity, for it is incomprehensible to him. He sees, rightly, that stupidity is more criminal than vice; if only because vice is curable, stupidity incurable. But he does not realise, as the great novelists have realised, that

stupidity can be pathetic, and that there is not a peasant, nor even a self-satisfied bourgeois, in whom the soul has not its part, in whose existence it is not possible to be interested.

Contempt, noble as it may be, anger, righteous though it may be, cannot be indulged in without a certain lack of sympathy; and lack of sympathy comes from a lack of patient understanding. It is certain that the destiny of the greater part of the human race is either infinitely pathetic or infinitely ridiculous. Under which aspect, then, shall that destiny, and those obscure fractions of humanity, be considered? Villiers was too sincere an idealist, too absolute in his idealism, to hesitate. "As for living," he cries, in that splendid phrase of *Axel*, "our servants will do that for us!" And, in the *Contes Cruels*, there is this not less characteristic expression of what was always his mental attitude: "As at the play, in a central stall, one sits out, so as not to disturb one's neighbours—out of courtesy, in a word—some play written in a wearisome style and of which one does not like the subject, so I lived, out of politeness": *je vivais par politesse*. In this haughtiness towards life, in this disdain of ordinary human motives and ordinary human beings, there is at once the dis-



tion and the weakness of Villiers. And he has himself pointed the moral against himself in these words of the story which forms the epilogue to the *Contes Cruels*: "When the forehead alone contains the existence of a man, that man is enlightened only from above his head; then his jealous shadow, prostrate under him, draws him by the feet, that it may drag him down into the invisible."

### III

All his life Villiers was a poor man; though, all his life, he was awaiting that fortune which he refused to anticipate by any mean employment. During most of his life, he was practically an unknown man. Greatly loved, ardently admired, by that inner circle of the men who have made modern French literature, from Verlaine to Maeterlinck, he was looked upon by most people as an amusing kind of madman, a little dangerous, whose ideas, as they floated freely over the café-table, it was at times highly profitable to steal. For Villiers talked his works before writing them, and sometimes he talked them instead of writing them, in

his too royally spendthrift way. To those who knew him he seemed genius itself, and would have seemed so if he had never written a line; for he had the dangerous gift of a personality which seems to have already achieved all that it so energetically contemplates. But personality tells 'only within hands' reach; and Villiers failed even to startle, failed even to exasperate, the general reader. That his *Premières Poésies*, published at the age of nineteen, should have brought him fame was hardly to be expected, remarkable, especially in its ideas, as that book is. Nor was it to be expected of the enigmatic fragment of a romance, *Isis* (1862), anticipating, as it does, by so long a period, the esoteric and spiritualistic romances which were to have their vogue. But *Elèn* (1864) and *Morgane* (1865), those two poetic dramas in prose, so full of distinction, of spiritual rarity; but two years later, *Claire Lenoir* (afterwards incorporated in one of his really great books, *Tribulat Bonhomiet*), with its macabre horror; but *La Révolte* (1870), for Villiers so "actual," and which had so genuine a success when it was revived in 1896 at the Odéon; but *Le Nouveau Monde* (1880), a drama which, by some extraordinary caprice, won a prize; but *Les Contes Cruels* (1880), that collec-

tion of masterpieces, in which the essentially French *conte* is outdone on its own ground! It was not till 1886 that Villiers ceased to be an unknown writer, with the publication of that phosphorescent, buffoonery of science, that vast parody of humanity, *L'Eve Future. Tribulat Bonhomet* (which he himself defined as *bouffonnerie énorme et sombre, couleur du siècle*) was to come, in its final form, and the superb poem in prose *Akëdysséril*; and then, more and more indifferent collections of stories, in which Villiers, already dying, is but the shadow of himself: *L'Amour Suprême* (1886), *Histoires Insolites* (1888), *Nouveaux Contes Cruels* (1888). He was correcting the proofs of *Axël* when he died; the volume was published in 1890, followed by *Propos d'au-delà*, and a series of articles, *Chez les Passants*. Once dead, the fame which had avoided him all his life began to follow him; he had *une belle presse* at his funeral.

Meanwhile, he had been preparing the spiritual atmosphere of the new generation. Living among believers in the material world, he had been declaring, not in vain, his belief in the world of the spirit; living among Realists and Parnassians, he had been creating a new form of art, the art of the Symbolist drama, and of Symbolism in fiction. He had been lonely all his life, for he had been

living, in his own lifetime, the life of the next generation. There was but one man among his contemporaries to whom he could give, and from whom he could receive, perfect sympathy. That man was Wagner. Gradually the younger men came about him; at the end he was not lacking in disciples.

And, after all, the last word of Villiers is faith; faith against the evidence of the senses, against the negations of materialistic science, against the monstrous paradox of progress, against his own pessimism in the face of these formidable enemies. He affirms; he "believes in soul, is very sure of God"; requires no witness to the spiritual world of which he is always the inhabitant; and is content to lose his way in the material world, brushing off its mud from time to time with a disdainful gesture, as he goes on his way (to apply a significant word of Pater) "like one on a secret errand."

ARTHUR RIMBAUD



## ARTHUR RIMBAUD

THAT story of the Arabian Nights, which is at the same time a true story, the life of Rimbaud, has been told, for the first time, in the extravagant but valuable book of an anarchist of letters, who writes under the name of Paterné Berrichon, and who has since married Rimbaud's sister. *'La Vie de Jean-Arthur Rimbaud'* is full of curiosity for those who have been mystified by I know not what legends, invented to give wonder to a career, itself more wonderful than any of the inventions. The man who died at Marseilles, at the Hospital of the Conception, on March 10, 1891, at the age of thirty-seven, *négociant*, as the register of his death describes him, was a writer of genius, an innovator in verse and prose, who had written all his poetry by the age of nineteen, and all his prose by a year or two later. He had given up literature to travel hither and thither, first in Europe, then in Africa;

he had been an engineer, a leader of caravans, a merchant of precious merchandise. And this man, who had never written down a line after those astonishing early experiments, was heard, in his last delirium, talking of precisely such visions as those which had haunted his youth, and using, says his sister, "expressions of a singular and penetrating charm" to render these sensations of visionary countries. Here certainly is one of the most curious problems of literature: is it a problem of which we can discover the secret?

Jean-Nicolas-Arthur Rimbaud was born at Charleville, in the Ardennes, October 28, 1854. His father, of whom he saw little, was a captain in the army; his mother, of peasant origin, was severe, rigid, and unsympathetic. At school he was an unwilling but brilliant scholar, and by his fifteenth year was well acquainted with Latin literature and intimately with French literature. It was in that year that he began to write poems, from the first curiously original: eleven poems dating from that year are to be found in his collected works. When he was sixteen he decided that he had had enough of school, and enough of home. Only Paris existed: he must go to Paris. The first time he went without a ticket; he spent,



indeed, fifteen days in Paris, but he spent them in Mazas, from which he was released and restored to his home by his schoolmaster. The second time, a few days later, he sold his watch, which paid for his railway ticket. This time he threw himself on the hospitality of André Gill, a painter and versewriter, of some little notoriety then, whose address he had happened to come across. The uninvited guest was not welcomed, and after some penniless days in Paris he tramped back to Charleville. The third time (he had waited five months, writing poems, and discontented to be only writing poems) he made his way to Paris on foot, in a heat of revolutionary sympathy, to offer himself to the insurgents of the Commune. Again he had to return on foot. Finally, having learnt with difficulty that a man is not taken at his own valuation until he has proved his right to be so accepted, he sent up the MS. of his poems to Verlaine. The MS. contained *Le Bateau Ivre*, *Les Premières Communions*, *Ma Bohème*, *Roman*, *Les Effares*, and, indeed, all but a few of the poems he ever wrote. Verlaine was overwhelmed with delight, and invited him to Paris. A local admirer lent him the money to get there, and from October 1871 to July 1872 he was Verlaine's guest.

The boy of seventeen, already a perfectly original poet, and beginning to be an equally original prose-writer, astonished the whole Parnasse, Banville, Hugo himself. On Verlaine his influence was more profound. The meeting brought about one of those lamentable and admirable disasters which make and unmake careers. Verlaine has told us in his *Confessions* that, "in the beginning, there was no question of any sort of affection or sympathy between two natures so different as that of the poet of the *Assis* and mine, but simply of an extreme admiration and astonishment before this boy of sixteen, who had already written things, as Fénéon has excellently said, 'perhaps outside literature.'" This admiration and astonishment passed gradually into a more personal feeling, and it was under the influence of Rimbaud that the long vagabondage of Verlaine's life began. The two poets wandered together through Belgium, England, and again Belgium, from July 1872 to August 1873, when there occurred that tragic parting at Brussels which left Verlaine a prisoner for eighteen months, and sent Rimbaud back to his family. He had already written all the poetry and prose that he was ever to write, and in 1873 he printed at Brussels *Une Saison en Enfer*.... It was the

only book he himself ever gave to the press, and no sooner was it printed than he destroyed the whole edition, with the exception of a few copies, of which only Verlaine's copy, I believe, still exists. Soon began new wanderings, with their invariable return to the starting-point of Charleville: a few days in Paris, a year in England, four months in Stuttgart (where he was visited by Verlaine), Italy, France again, Vienna, Java, Holland, Sweden, Egypt, Cyprus, Abyssinia, and then nothing but Africa, until the final return to France. He had been a teacher of French in England, a seller of key-rings in the streets of Paris, had unloaded vessels in the ports, and helped to gather in the harvest in the country; he had been a volunteer in the Dutch army, a military engineer, a trader; and now physical sciences had begun to attract his insatiable curiosity, and dreams of the fabulous East began to resolve themselves into dreams of a romantic commerce with the real East. He became a merchant of coffee, perfumes, ivory, and gold, in the interior of Africa; then an explorer, a predecessor, and in his own regions, of Marchand. After twelve years' wandering and exposure in Africa he was attacked by a malady of the knee, which rapidly became worse. He was transported

first to Aden, then to Marseilles, where, in May 1891, his leg was amputated. Further complications set in. He insisted, first, on being removed to his home, then on being taken back to Marseilles. His sufferings were an intolerable torment, and more cruel to him was the torment of his desire to live. He died inch by inch, fighting every inch; and his sister's quiet narrative of those last months is agonising. He died at Marseilles in November, "prophesying," says his sister, and repeating, "Allah Kerim! Allah Kerim!"

The secret of Rimbaud, I think, and the reason why he was able to do the unique thing in literature which he did, and then to disappear quietly and become a legend in the East, is that his mind was not the mind of the artist but of the man of action. He was a dreamer, but all his dreams were discoveries. To him it was an identical act of his temperament to write the sonnet of the *Vowels* and to trade in ivory and frankincense with the Arabs. He lived with all his faculties at every instant of his life, abandoning himself to himself with a confidence which was at once his strength and (looking at things less absolutely) his weakness. To the student of success, and what is relative in achievement, he illustrates the danger of

one's over-possession by one's own genius, just as aptly as the saint in the cloister does, or the mystic too full of God to speak intelligibly to the world, or the spilt wisdom of the drunkard. The artist who is above all things an artist cultivates a little choice corner of himself with elaborate care ; he brings miraculous flowers to growth there, but the rest of the garden is but mown grass or tangled bushes. That is why many excellent writers, very many painters, and most musicians are so tedious on any subject but their own. Is it not tempting, does it not seem a devotion rather than a superstition, to worship the golden chalice in which the wine has been made God, as if the chalice were the reality, and the Real Presence the symbol? The artist, who is only an artist, circumscribes his intelligence into almost such a fiction, as he reverences the work of his own hands. But there are certain natures (great or small, Shakespeare or Rimbaud, it makes no difference) to whom the work is nothing ; the act of working, everything. Rimbaud was a small, narrow, hard, precipitate nature, which had the will to live, and nothing but the will to live ; and his verses, and his follies, and his wanderings, and his traffickings were but the breathing of different hours in his day.

That is why he is so swift, definite, and quickly exhausted in vision ; why he had his few things to say, each an action with consequences. He invents new ways of saying things, not because he is a learned artist, but because he is burning to say them, and he has none of the hesitations of knowledge. He leaps right over or through the conventions that had been standing in everybody's way ; he has no time to go round, and no respect for trespass-boards, and so he becomes the *enfant terrible* of literature, playing pranks (as in that sonnet of the *Vowels*), knocking down barriers for the mere amusement of the thing, getting all the possible advantage of his barbarisms in mind and conduct. And so, in life, he is first of all conspicuous as a disorderly liver, a revolter against morals as against prosody, though we may imagine that, in his heart, morals meant as little to him, one way or the other, as prosody. Later on, his revolt seems to be against civilisation itself, as he disappears into the deserts of Africa. And it is, if you like, a revolt against civilisation, but the revolt is instinctive, a need of the organism ; it is not doctrinal, cynical, a conviction, a sentiment.

Always, as he says, *rêvant univers fantastiques*, he is conscious of the danger as well as the ecstasy

of that divine imitation; for he says: "My life, will always be too vast to be given up wholly to force and beauty." *J'attends Dieu avec gourmandise*, he cries, in a fine rapture; and then, sadly enough: "I have created all the feasts, all the triumphs, all the dramas of the world. I have set myself to invent new flowers, a new flesh, a new language. I have fancied that I have attained supernatural power. Well, I have now only to put my imagination and my memories in the grave. What a fine artist's and storyteller's fame thrown away!" See how completely he is conscious, and how completely he is at the mercy, of that hallucinatory rage of vision, vision to him being always force, power, creation, which on some of his pages seems to become sheer madness, and on others a kind of wild but absolute insight. He will be silent, he tells us, as to all that he contains within his mind, "greedy as the sea," for otherwise poets and visionaries would envy him his fantastic wealth. And, in that *Nuit d'Enfer*, which does not bear that title in vain, he exalts himself as a kind of saviour; he is in the circle of pride in Dante's hell, and he has lost all sense of limit, really believes himself to be "no one and some one." Then, in the *Alchimie du Verbe*, he becomes the analyst of his own hallucina-

## 72 THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT

tions. "I believe in all the enchantments," he tells us; "I invented the colour of the vowels: A, black; E, white; I, red; O, blue; U, green.\* I regulated the form and the movement of every consonant, and, with instinctive rhythms, I flattered myself that I had invented a poetic language accessible, one day or another, to every shade of meaning. I reserved to myself the right of translation . . . I accustomed myself to simple hallucination: I saw, quite frankly, a mosque in place of a factory, a school of drums kept by the angels,

\* Here is the famous sonnet, which must be taken, as it was meant, without undue seriousness, and yet as something more than a mere joke.

### VOYELLES.

*A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu, voyelles,  
Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes.  
A, noir corset velu des mouches éclatantes  
Qui bombillent autour des puanteurs cruelles,  
Golfe d'ombre; E, candeur des vapeurs et des tentes,  
Lance des glaciers fiers, rois blancs, frissons d'ombelles;  
I, pourpres, sang craché, rive des lèvres belles  
Dans la colère ou les ivresses pénitentes;  
U, cycles, vibrations divins des mers virides,  
Paix des pétiis semés d'animaux, paix des rides  
Que l'alchimie imprime aux grands fronts studieux;  
O, suprême clairon plein de strideurs étranges,  
Silences traversés des mondes et des Anges;  
—O l'Oméga, rayon violet de Ses Yeux!*



post-chaises on the roads of heaven, a drawing-room at the bottom of a lake ; monsters, mysteries; the title of a vaudeville raised up horrors before me. Then I explained my magical sophisms by the hallucination of words ! I ended by finding something sacred in the disorder of my mind." Then he makes the great discovery. Action, one sees, this fraudulent and insistent will to live, has been at the root of all these mental and verbal orgies, in which he has been wasting the very substance of his thought. Well, "action," he discovers, "is not life, but a way of spoiling something." Even this is a form of enervation, and must be rejected from the absolute. *Mon devoir m'est remis. Il ne faut plus songer à cela. Je suis réellement d'outre-tombe, et pas de commissions.*

It is for the absolute that he seeks, always ; the absolute which the great artist, with his careful wisdom, has renounced seeking. And he is content with nothing less ; hence his own contempt for what he has done, after all, so easily ; for what has come to him, perhaps through his impatience, but imperfectly. He is a dreamer in whom dream is swift, hard in outline, coming suddenly and going suddenly, a real thing, but seen only in passing. Visions rush past him, he cannot arrest

them ; they rush forth from him, he cannot restrain their haste to be gone, as he creates them in the mere indiscriminate idleness of energy. And so this seeker after the absolute leaves but a broken medley of fragments, into each of which he has put a little of his personality, which he is for ever dramatising, by multiplying one facet, so to speak, after another. Very genuinely, he is now a beaten and wandering ship, flying in a sort of intoxication before the wind, over undiscovered seas ; now a starving child outside a baker's window, in the very ecstasy of hunger ; now *la victime et la petite épouse* of the first communion ; now :

*Je ne parlerai pas, je ne penserai rien ;  
Mais l'amour infini me montera dans l'âme,  
Et j'irai loin, bien loin, comme un bohémien,  
Par la Nature, heureux comme avec une femme !*

He catches at verse, at prose, invents a sort of *vers libre* before any one else, not quite knowing what to do with it, invents a quite new way of writing prose, which Laforgue will turn to account later on ; and having suggested, with some impatience, half the things that his own and the next generation are to busy themselves with developing, he gives up writing, as an inadequate form, to which he is also inadequate.

What, then, is the actual value of Rimbaud's work, in verse and prose, apart from its relative values of so many kinds? I think, considerable; though it will probably come to rest on two or three pieces of verse, and a still vaguer accomplishment in prose. He brought into French verse something of that "gipsy way of going with nature, as with a woman"; a very young, very crude, very defiant and sometimes very masterly sense of just those real things which are too close to us to be seen by most people with any clearness. He could render physical sensation, of the subtlest kind, without making any compromise with language, forcing language to speak straight, taming it as one would tame a dangerous animal. And he kneaded prose as he kneaded verse, making it a disarticulated, abstract, mathematically lyrical thing. In verse, he pointed the way to certain new splendours, as to certain new *navetés*; there is the *Bateau Ivre*, without which we might never have had Verlaine's *Crimen Amoris*. And, intertangled with what is ingenuous, and with what is splendid, there is a certain irony, which comes into that youthful work as if youth were already reminiscent of itself, so conscious is it that youth is youth, and that youth is passing.

In all these ways, Rimbaud had his influence upon Verlaine, and his influence upon Verlaine was above all the influence of the man of action upon the man of sensation; the influence of what is simple, narrow, emphatic, upon what is subtle, complex, growing. Verlaine's rich, sensitive nature was just then trying to realise itself. Just because it had such delicate possibilities, because there were so many directions in which it could grow, it was not at first quite sure of its way. Rimbaud came into the life and art of Verlaine, troubling both, with that trouble which reveals a man to himself. Having helped to make Verlaine a great poet, he could go. Note that he himself could never have developed: writing had been one of his discoveries; he could but make other discoveries, personal ones. Even in literature he had his future; but his future was Verlaine.

PAUL VERLAINE



## PAUL VERLAINE

### I

"BIEN affectueusement . . . yours, P. Verlaine." So, in its gay and friendly mingling of French and English, ended the last letter I had from Verlaine. A few days afterwards came the telegram from Paris telling me of his death, in the Rue Descartes, on that 8th January 1896.

"Condemned to death," as he was, in Victor Hugo's phrase of men in general, "with a sort of indefinite reprieve," and gravely ill as I had for some time known him to be, it was still with a shock, not only of sorrow, but of surprise, that I heard the news of his death. He had suffered and survived so much, and I found it so hard to associate the idea of death with one who had always been so passionately in love with life, more passionately in love with life than any man I ever knew. Rest was one of the delicate privileges of

life which he never loved: he did but endure it with grumbling gaiety when a hospital-bed claimed him. And whenever he spoke to me of the long rest which has now sealed his eyelids, it was with a shuddering revolt from the thought of ever going away into the cold, out of the sunshine which had been so warm to him. With all his pains, misfortunes, and the calamities which followed him step by step all his life, I think few men ever got so much out of their lives, or lived so fully, so intensely, with such a genius for living. That, indeed, is why he was a great poet. Verlaine was a man who gave its full value to every moment, who got out of every moment all that that moment had to give him. It was not always, not often, perhaps, pleasure. But it was energy, the vital force of a nature which was always receiving and giving out, never at rest, never passive, or indifferent, or hesitating. It is impossible for me to convey to those who did not know him any notion of how sincere he was. The word "sincerity" seems hardly to have emphasis enough to say, in regard to this one man, what it says, adequately enough, of others. He sinned, and it was with all his humanity; he repented, and it was with all his soul. And to every occurrence of the



day, to every mood of the mind, to every impulse of the creative instinct, he brought the same unparalleled sharpness of sensation. When, in 1894, he was my guest in London, I was amazed by the exactitude of his memory of the mere turnings of the streets, the shapes and colours of the buildings, which he had not seen for twenty years. He saw, he felt, he remembered, everything, with an unconscious mental selection of the fine shades, the essential part of things, or precisely those aspects which most other people would pass by.

Few poets of our time have been more often drawn, few have been easier to draw, few have better repaid drawing, than Paul Verlaine. A face without a beautiful line, a face all character, full of somnolence and sudden fire, in which every irregularity was a kind of aid to the crayon, could not but tempt the artist desiring at once to render a significant likeness and to have his own part in the creation of a picture. Verlaine, like all men of genius, had something of the air of the somnambulist: that profound slumber of the face, as it was in him, with its startling awakenings. It was a face devoured by dreams, feverish and somnolent; it had earthly passion, intellectual pride, spiritual humility; the air of one who remembers, not without an

effort, who is listening, half distractedly to something which other people do not hear; coming back so suddenly, and from so far, with the relief of one who steps out of that obscure shadow into the noisier forgetfulness of life. The eyes, often half closed, were like the eyes of a cat between sleeping and waking; eyes in which contemplation was "itself an act." A remarkable lithograph by Mr. Rothenstein (the face lit by oblique eyes, the folded hand thrust into the cheek) gives with singular truth the sensation of that restless watch on things which this prisoner of so many chains kept without slackening. To Verlaine every corner of the world was alive with tempting and consoling and terrifying beauty. I have never known any one to whom the sight of the eyes was so intense and imaginative a thing. To him, physical sight and spiritual vision, by some strange alchemical operation of the brain, were one. And in the disquietude of his face, which seemed to take such close heed of things, precisely because it was sufficiently apart from them to be always a spectator, there was a realisable process of vision continually going on, in which all the loose ends of the visible world were being caught up into a new mental fabric.

And along with this fierce subjectivity, into

which the egoism of the artist entered so unconsciously, and in which it counted for so much, there was more than the usual amount of childishness, always in some measure present in men of genius. There was a real, almost blithe, childishness in the way in which he would put on his "Satanic" expression, of which it was part of the joke that every one should not be quite in the secret. It was a whim of this kind which made him put at the beginning of *Romances sans Paroles* that very criminal image of a head which had so little resemblance with even the shape, indeed curious enough, of his actual head. "Born under the sign of Saturn," as he no doubt was, with that "old prisoner's head" of which he tells us, it was by his amazing faculty for a simple kind of happiness that he always impressed me. I have never seen so cheerful an invalid as he used to be at that hospital, the Hôpital Saint-Louis, where at one time I used to go and see him every week. His whole face seemed to chuckle as he would tell me, in his emphatic, confiding way, everything that entered into his head; the droll stories cut short by a groan, a lamentation, a sudden fury of reminiscence, at which his face would cloud or convulse, the wild eyebrows slanting up and down; and then, suddenly,

## 84 THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT

the good laugh would be back, clearing the air. No one was ever so responsive to his own moods as Verlaine, and with him every mood had the vehemence of a passion. Is not his whole art a delicate waiting upon moods, with that perfect confidence in them as they are, which it is a large part of ordinary education to discourage in us, and a large part of experience to repress? But to Verlaine, happily, experience taught nothing; or rather, it taught him only to cling the more closely to those moods in whose succession lies the more intimate part of our spiritual life.

It is no doubt well for society that man should learn by experience; for the artist the benefit is doubtful. The artist, it cannot be too clearly understood, has no more part in society than a monk in domestic life: he cannot be judged by its rules, he can be neither praised nor blamed for his acceptance or rejection of its conventions. Social rules are made by normal people for normal people, and the man of genius is fundamentally abnormal. It is the poet against society, society against the poet, a direct antagonism; the shock of which, however, it is often possible to avoid by a compromise. So much licence is allowed on the one side, so much liberty foregone on the other. The consequences

are not always of the best, art being generally the loser. But there are certain natures to which compromise is impossible ; and the nature of Verlaine was one of these natures.

"The soul of an immortal child," says one who has understood him better than others, Charles Morice, "that is the soul of Verlaine, with all the privileges and all the perils of so being : with the sudden 'despair' so easily distracted, the vivid gaieties without a cause, the excessive suspicion and the excessive confidences, the whims so easily outwearied, the deaf and blind infatuations, with, especially, the unceasing renewal of impressions in the incorruptible integrity of personal vision and sensation. Years, influences, teachings, may pass over a temperament such as this, may irritate it, may fatigue it ; transform it, never—never so much as to alter that particular unity which consists in a dualism, in the division of forces between the longing after what is evil and the adoration of what is good ; or rather, in the antagonism of spirit and flesh. Other men 'arrange' their lives, take sides, follow one direction ; Verlaine hesitates before a choice, which seems to him monstrous, for, with the integral *naïveté* of irrefutable human truth, he cannot resign himself, however strong may be the

doctrine, however enticing may be the passion, to the necessity of sacrificing one to the other, and from one to the other he oscillates without a moment's repose."

It is in such a sense as this that Verlaine may be said to have learnt nothing from experience, in the sense that he learnt everything direct from life, and without comparing day with day. That the exquisite artist of the *Fêtes Galantes* should become the great poet of *Sagesse*, it was needful that things should have happened as disastrously as they did: the marriage with the girl-wife, that brief idyl, the passion for drink, those other forbidden passions, vagabondage, an attempted crime, the eighteen months of prison, conversion; followed, as it had to be, by relapse, bodily sickness, poverty, beggary almost, a lower and lower descent into mean distresses. It was needful that all this should happen, in order that the spiritual vision should eclipse the material vision; but it was needful that all this should happen in vain, so far as the conduct of life was concerned. Reflection, in Verlaine, is pure waste; it is the speech of the soul and the speech of the eyes, that we must listen to in his verse, never the speech of the reason. And I call him fortunate because, going through life with a great

unconsciousness of what most men spend their lives in considering, he was able to abandon himself entirely to himself, to his unimpeded vision, to his unchecked emotion, to the passionate sincerity which in him was genius.

## II

French poetry, before Verlaine, was an admirable vehicle for a really fine, a really poetical, kind of rhetoric. With Victor Hugo, for the first time since Ronsard (the two or three masterpieces of Ronsard and his companions) it had learnt to sing; with Baudelaire it had invented a new vocabulary for the expression of subtle, often perverse, essentially modern emotion and sensation. But with Victor Hugo, with Baudelaire, we are still under the dominion of rhetoric. "Take eloquence, and wring its neck!" said Verlaine in his *Art Poétique*; and he showed, by writing it, that French verse could be written without rhetoric. It was partly from his study of English models that he learnt the secret of liberty in verse, but it was much more a secret found by the way, in the mere endeavour to

be absolutely sincere, to express exactly what he saw, to give voice to his own temperament, in which intensity of feeling seemed to find its own expression, as if by accident *L'art, mes enfants, c'est d'être absolument soi-même*, he tells us in one of his later poems ; and, with such a personality as Verlaine's to express, what more has art to do, if it would truly, and in any interesting manner, hold the mirror up to nature ?

For, consider the natural qualities which this man had for the task of creating a new poetry. "Sincerity, and the impression of the moment followed to the letter" : that is how he defined his theory of style, in an article written about himself.

*Car nous voulons la nuance encor,  
Pas la couleur, rien que la nuance !*

as he cries, in his famous *Art Poétique*. Take, then, his susceptibility of the senses, an emotional susceptibility not less delicate ; a life sufficiently troubled to draw out every emotion of which he was capable, and, with it, that absorption in the moment, that inability to look before or after ; the need to love and the need to confess, each a passion ; an art of painting the fine shades of landscape, of evoking atmosphere, which can be com-



pared only with the art of Whistler; a simplicity of language which is the direct outcome of a simplicity of temperament, with just enough consciousness of itself for a final elegance; and, at the very depth of his being, an almost fierce humility, by which the passion of love, after searching furiously through all his creatures, finds God by the way, and kneels in the dust before him. Verlaine was never a theorist: he left theories to Mallarmé. He had only his divination; and he divined that poetry, always desiring that miracles should happen, had never waited patiently enough upon the miracle. It was by that proud and humble mysticism of his temperament that he came to realise how much could be done by, in a sense, trying to do nothing.

And then: *De la musique avant toute chose; De la musique encore et toujours!* There are poems of Verlaine which go as far as verse can go to become pure music, the voice of a bird with a human soul. It is part of his simplicity, his divine childishness, that he abandons himself, at times, to the song which words begin to sing in the air, with the same wise confidence with which he abandons himself to the other miracles about him. He knows that words are living things, which we have not created, and which go their way without de-

manding of us the right to live. He knows that words are suspicious, not without their malice, and that they resist mere force with the impalpable resistance of fire or water. They are to be caught only with guile or with trust. Verlaine has both, and words become Ariel to him. They bring him not only that submission of the slave which they bring to others, but all the soul, and in a happy bondage. They transform themselves for him into music, colour, and shadow; a disembodied music, diaphanous colours, luminous shadow. They serve him with so absolute a self-negation that he can write *romances sans paroles*, songs almost without words, in which scarcely a sense of the interference of human speech remains. The ideal of lyric poetry, certainly, is to be this passive, flawless medium for the deeper consciousness of things, the mysterious voice of that mystery which lies about us, out of which we have come, and into which we shall return. It is not without reason that we cannot analyse a perfect lyric.

With Verlaine the sense of hearing and the sense of sight are almost interchangeable: he paints with sound, and his line and atmosphere become music. It was with the most precise accuracy that Whistler applied the terms of music to his painting, for

painting, when it aims at being the vision of reality, *pas la couleur, rien que la nuance*, passes almost into the condition of music. Verlaine's landscape painting is always an evocation, in which outline is lost in atmosphere.

*C'est des beaux yeux derrière des voiles,  
C'est le grand jour tremblant de nudité,  
C'est, par un ciel d'automne attiédi,  
Le bleu feuillu des claires étoiles!*

He was a man, certainly, "for whom the visible world existed," but for whom it existed always as a vision. He absorbed it through all his senses, as the true mystic absorbs the divine beauty. And so he created in verse a new voice for nature, full of the humble ecstasy with which he saw, listened, accepted.

*Cette âme qui se lamente  
En cette plaine dormante  
C'est la nôtre, n'est-ce pas?  
La mienne, dis, et la tienne,  
Dont s'exhale l'humble antienne  
Par ce tiède soir, tout bas?*

And with the same attentive simplicity with which he found words for the sensations of hearing and the sensations of sight, he found words for the

sensations of the soul, for the fine shades of feeling. From the moment when his inner life may be said to have begun, he was occupied with the task of an unceasing confession, in which one seems to overhear him talking to himself, in that vague, pre-occupied way which he often had. Here again are words which startle one by their delicate resemblance to thoughts, by their winged flight from so far, by their alighting so close. The verse murmurs, with such an ingenuous confidence, such intimate secrets. That "setting free" of verse, which is one of the achievements of Verlaine, was itself mainly an attempt to be more and more sincere, a way of turning poetic artifice to new account, by getting back to nature itself, hidden away under the eloquent rhetoric of Hugo, Baudelaire, and the Parnassians. In the devotion of rhetoric to either beauty or truth, there is a certain consciousness of an audience, of an external judgment: rhetoric would convince, be admired. It is the very essence of poetry to be unconscious of anything between its own moment of flight and the supreme beauty which it will never attain. Verlaine taught French poetry that wise and subtle unconsciousness. It was in so doing that he "fused his personality," in the words of Verhaeren,

"so profoundly with beauty, that he left upon it the imprint of a new and henceforth eternal attitude."

## III

*J'ai la fureur d'aimer*, says Verlaine, in a passage of very personal significance.

*J'ai la fureur d'aimer. Mon cœur si faible est fou.  
N'importe quand, n'importe quel et n'importe où,  
Qu'un éclair de beauté, de vertu, de vaillance,  
Luise, il s'y précipite, il y vole, il y lance,  
Et, le temps d'une étreinte, il embrasse cent fois  
L'être ou l'objet qu'il a poursuivi de son choix ;  
Puis, quand l'illusion a replié son aile,  
Il revient triste et seul bien souvent, mais fidèle,  
Et laissant aux ingrats quelque chose de lui,  
Sang ou chair . . . .  
J'ai la fureur d'aimer. Qu'y faire ? Ah, laissez  
faire !*

And certainly this admirable, and supremely dangerous, quality was at the root of Verlaine's nature. Instinctive, unreasoning as he was, entirely at the mercy of the emotion or impression which, for the moment, had seized upon him, it was inevitable that he should be completely at the mercy of

the most imperious of instincts, of passions, and of intoxications. And he had the simple and ardent nature, in this again consistently childlike, to which love, some kind of affection, given or returned, is not the luxury, the exception, which it is to many natures, but a daily necessity. To such a temperament there may or may not be the one great passion; there will certainly be many passions. And in Verlaine I find that single, childlike necessity of loving and being loved, all through his life and on every page of his works; I find it, unchanged in essence, but constantly changing form, in his chaste and unchaste devotions to women, in his passionate friendships with men, in his supreme mystical adoration of God.

To turn from *La Bonne Chanson*, written for a wedding present to a young wife, to *Chansons pour Elle*, written more than twenty years later, in dubious honour of a middle-aged mistress, is to travel a long road, the hard, long road which Verlaine had travelled during those years. His life was ruinous, a disaster, more sordid perhaps than the life of any other poet; and he could write of it, from a hospital-bed, with this quite sufficient sense of its deprivations. "But all the same, it is hard," he laments, in *Mes Hôpitaux*, "after a life

of work, set off, I admit, with accidents in which I have had a large share, catastrophes perhaps vaguely premeditated—it is hard, I say, at forty-seven years of age, in full possession of all the reputation (of the *success*, to use the frightful current phrase) to which my highest ambitions could aspire—hard, hard, hard indeed, worse than hard, to find myself—good God!—to find myself *on the streets*, and to have nowhere to lay my head and support an ageing body save the pillows and the *memes* of a public charity, even now uncertain, and which might at any moment be withdrawn—God forbid!—without, apparently, the fault of any one, oh! not even, and above all, not mine” Yet, after all, these sordid miseries, this poor man’s vagabondage, all the misfortunes of one certainly “irreclaimable,” on which so much stress has been laid, alike by friends and by foes, are externalities; they are not the man; the man, the eternal lover, passionate and humble, remains unchanged, while only his shadow wanders, from morning to night of the long day.

The poems to Rimbaud, to Lucien Létiinois, to others, the whole volume of *Dédicaces*, cover perhaps as wide a range of sentiment as *La Bonne Chanson* and *Chansons pour Elle*. The poetry of

friendship has never been sung with such plaintive sincerity, such simple human feeling, as in some of these poems, which can only be compared, in modern poetry, with a poem for which Verlaine had a great admiration, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Only, with Verlaine, the thing itself, the affection or the regret, is everything ; there is no room for meditation over destiny, or search for a problematical consolation. Other poems speak a more difficult language, in which, doubtless, *l'ennui de vivre avec les gens et dans les choses* counts for much, and *la fureur d'aimer* for more.

In spite of the general impression to the contrary, an impression which by no means displeased him himself, I must contend that the sensuality of Verlaine, brutal as it could sometimes be, was after all simple rather than complicated, instinctive rather than perverse. In the poetry of Baudelaire, with which the poetry of Verlaine is so often compared, there is a deliberate science of sensual perversity which has something almost monachal in its accentuation of vice with horror, in its passionate devotion to passions. Baudelaire brings every complication of taste, the exasperation of perfumes, the irritant of cruelty, the very odours and colours of corruption, to the creation and adornment of a



sort of religion, in which an eternal mass is served before a veiled altar. There is no confession, no absolution, not a prayer is permitted which is not set down in the ritual. With Verlaine, however often love may pass into sensuality, to whatever length sensuality may be hurried, sensuality is never more than the malady of love. It is love desiring the absolute, seeking in vain, seeking always, and, finally, out of the depths, finding God.

Verlaine's conversion took place while he was in prison, during those solitary eighteen months in company with his thoughts, that enforced physical inactivity, which could but concentrate his whole energy on the only kind of sensation then within his capacity, the sensations of the soul and of the conscience. With that promptitude of abandonment which was his genius, he grasped feverishly at the succour of God and the Church, he abased himself before the immaculate purity of the Virgin. He had not, like others who have risen from the same depths to the same height of humiliation, to despoil his nature of its pride, to conquer his intellect, before he could become *l'enfant vêtu de laine et d'innocence*. All that was simple, humble, childlike in him accepted that humiliation with the

loving child's joy in penitence ; all that was ardent, impulsive, indomitable in him burst at once into a flame of adoration.

He realised the great secret of the Christian mystics : that it is possible to love God with an extravagance of the whole being, to which the love of the creature cannot attain. All love is an attempt to break through the loneliness of individuality, to fuse oneself with something not oneself, to give and to receive, in all the warmth of natural desire, that inmost element which remains, so cold and so invincible, in the midst of the soul. It is a desire of the infinite in humanity, and, as humanity has its limits, it can but return sadly upon itself when that limit is reached. Thus human love is not only an ecstasy but a despair, and the more profound a despair the more ardently it is returned.

But the love of God, considered only from its human aspect, contains at least the illusion of infinity. To love God is to love the absolute, so far as the mind of man can conceive the absolute, and thus, in a sense, to love God is to possess the absolute, for love has already possessed that which it apprehends. What the earthly lover realises to himself as the image of his beloved is, after all, his

own vision of love, not her. God must remain *deus absconditus*, even to love; but the lover, incapable of possessing infinity, will have possessed all of infinity of which he is capable. And his ecstasy will be flawless. The human mind, meditating on infinity, can but discover perfection beyond perfection; for it is impossible to conceive of limitation in any aspect of that which has once been conceived as infinite. In place of that deception which comes from the shock of a boundary-line beyond which humanity cannot conceive of humanity, there is only a divine rage against the limits of human perception, which by their own failure seem at last to limit for us the infinite itself. For once, love finds itself bounded only by its own capacity; so far does the love of God exceed the love of the creature, and so far would it exceed that love if God did not exist.

But if he does exist! if, outside humanity, a conscient, eternal perfection, who has made the world in his image, loves the humanity he has made, and demands love in return! If the spirit of his love is as a breath over the world, suggesting, strengthening, the love which it desires, seeking man that man may seek God, itself the impulse

which it humbles itself to accept at man's hands ;  
if, indeed,

*Mon Dieu m'a dit : mon fils, il faut m'aimer ;*

how much more is this love of God, in its inconceivable acceptance and exchange, the most divine, the only unending, intoxication in the world ! Well, it is this realised sense of communion, point by point realised, and put into words, more simple, more human, more instinctive than any poet since the mediæval mystics has found for the delights of this intercourse, that we find in *Sagesse*, and in the other religious poems of Verlaine.

But, with Verlaine, the love of God is not merely a rapture, it is a thanksgiving for forgiveness. Lying in wait behind all the fair appearances of the world, he remembers the old enemy, the flesh ; and the sense of sin (that strange paradox of the reason) is childishly strong in him. He laments his offence, he sees not only the love but the justice of God, and it seems to him, as in a picture, that the little hands of the Virgin are clasped in petition for him. Verlaine's religion is the religion of the Middle Ages. *Je suis catholique*, he said to me, *mais . . . catholique du moyen-âge!* He might have written the ballad which Villon made for his mother,

and with the same visual sense of heaven and hell. Like a child, he tells his sins over, promises that he has put them behind him, and finds such *naïve*, human words to express his gratitude. The Virgin is really, to him, mother and friend ; he delights in the simple, peasant humanity, still visible in her who is also the Mystical Rose, the Tower of Ivory, the Gate of Heaven, and who now extends her hands, in the gesture of pardon, from a throne only just lower than the throne of God.

## IV

Experience, I have said, taught Verlaine nothing ; religion had no more stable influence upon his conduct than experience. In that apology for himself which he wrote under the anagram of "Pauvre Lelian," he has stated the case with his usual sincerity. "I believe," he says, "and I sin in thought as in action ; I believe, and I repent in thought, if no more. Or again, I believe, and I am a good Christian at this moment ; I believe, and I am a bad Christian the instant after. The remembrance, the hope, the invocation of a sin delights me, with

or without remorse, sometimes under the very form of sin, and hedged with all its natural consequences; more often—so strong, so natural and *animal*, are flesh and blood—just in the same manner as the remembrances, hopes, invocations of any carnal freethinker. This delight, I, you, some one else, writers, it pleases us to put to paper and publish more or less well expressed: we consign it, in short, into literary form, forgetting all religious ideas, or not letting one of them escape us. Can any one in good faith condemn us as poet? A hundred times no." And, indeed, I should echo, a hundred times no! It is just this apparent complication of what is really a great simplicity which gives its singular value to the poetry of Verlaine, permitting it to sum up in itself the whole paradox of humanity, and especially the weak, passionate, uncertain, troubled century to which we belong, in which so many doubts, negations, and distresses seem, now more than ever, to be struggling towards at least an ideal of spiritual consolation. Verlaine is the poet of these weaknesses and of that ideal.

JULES LAFORGUE





## JULES LAFORGUE

JULES LAFORGUE was born at Montevideo, of Breton parents, August 20, 1860. He died in Paris in 1887, two days before his twenty-seventh birthday. From 1880 to 1886 he had been reader to the Empress Augusta at Berlin. He married only a few months before his death. *D'allures?* says M. Gustave Kahn, *fort correctes, de hauts gibus, des cravates sobres, des vestons anglais, des pardessus clergymans, et de par les nécessités, un parapluie immuablement placé sous le bras.* His portraits show us a clean-shaved, reticent face, betraying little. With such a personality anecdotes have but small chance of appropriating those details by which expansive natures express themselves to the world. We know nothing about Laforgue which his work is not better able to tell us. The whole of that work is contained in two small volumes, one of prose, the *Moralités Légend-*

aires, the other of verse, *Les Complaintes*, *L'Imitation de Notre-Dame la Lune*, and a few other pieces, all published during the last three years of his life.

The prose and verse of Laforgue, scrupulously correct, but with a new manner of correctness, owe more than any one has realised to the half-unconscious prose and verse of Rimbaud. Verse and prose are alike a kind of travesty, making subtle use of colloquialism, slang, neologism, technical terms, for their allusive, their factitious, their reflected meanings, with which one can play, very seriously. The verse is alert, troubled, swaying, deliberately uncertain, hating rhetoric so piously that it prefers, and finds its piquancy in, the ridiculously obvious. It is really *vers libre*, but at the same time correct verse, before *vers libre* had been invented. And it carries, as far as that theory has ever been carried, the theory which demands an instantaneous notation (Whistler, let us say) of the figure or landscape which one has been accustomed to define with such rigorous exactitude. Verse, always elegant, is broken up into a kind of mockery of prose.

*Encore un de mes pierrots mort ;  
Mort d'un chronique orphelinisme ;  
C'était un cœur plein de dandysme  
Lunaire, en un drôle de corps ;*

he will say to us, with a familiarity of manner, as of one talking languidly, in a low voice, the lips always teased into a slightly bitter smile; and he will pass suddenly into the ironical lilt of

*Hotel garni  
De l'infini,  
Sphinx et Foconde  
Des défunts mondes;*

and from that into this solemn and smiling end of one of his last poems, his own epitaph, if you will:

*Il prit froid l'autre automne,  
S'étant attardi vers les peines des cors,  
Sur la fin d'un beau jour.  
Oh ! ce fut pour vos cors, et ce fut pour l'automne,  
Qu'il nous montra qu' "on meurt d'amour !"  
On ne le verra plus aux fêtes nationales,  
S'enfermer dans l'Histoire et tirer les verrous,  
Il vint trop tard, il est reparti sans scandale;  
O vous qui m'écoutez, rentrez chacun chez vous.*

The old cadences, the old eloquence, the ingenuous seriousness of poetry, are all banished, on a theory as self-denying as that which permitted Degas to dispense with recognisable beauty in his figures. Here, if ever, is modern verse, verse which dispenses with so many of the privileges of poetry, for

an ideal quite of its own. It is, after all, a very self-conscious ideal, becoming artificial through its extreme naturalness; for in poetry it is not "natural" to say things quite so much in the manner of the moment, with however ironical an intention.

The prose of the *Moralités Légendaires* is perhaps even more of a discovery. Finding its origin, as I have pointed out, in the experimental prose of Rimbaud, it carries that manner to a singular perfection. Disarticulated, abstract, mathematically lyrical, it gives expression, in its icy ecstasy, to a very subtle criticism of the universe, with a surprising irony of cosmical vision. We learn from books of mediæval magic that the embraces of the devil are of a coldness so intense that it may be called, by an allowable figure of speech, fiery. Everything may be as strongly its opposite as itself, and that is why this balanced, chill, colloquial style of Laforgue has, in the paradox of its intensity, the essential heat of the most obviously emotional prose. The prose is more patient than the verse, with its more compassionate laughter at universal experience. It can laugh as seriously, as profoundly, as in that graveyard monologue of Hamlet, Laforgue's Hamlet, who, Maeterlinck ventures to

say, "is at moments more Hamlet than the Hamlet of Shakespeare." Let me translate a few sentences from it.

"Perhaps I have still twenty or thirty years to live, and I shall pass that way like the others. Like the others? O Totality, the misery of being there no longer! Ah! I would like to set out to-morrow, and search all through the world for the most adamant processes of embalming. They, too, were, the little people of History, learning to read, trimming their nails, lighting the dirty lamp every evening, in love, gluttonous, vain, fond of compliments, hand-shakes, and kisses, living on bell-tower gossip, saying, 'What sort of weather shall we have to-morrow? Winter has really come. . . . We have had no plums this year.' Ah! everything is good, if it would not come to an end. And thou, Silence, pardon the Earth; the little madcap hardly knows what she is doing; on the day of the great summing-up of consciousness before the Ideal, she will be labelled with a pitiful *idem* in the column of the miniature evolutions of the Unique Evolution, in the column of negligible quantities . . . To die! Evidently, one dies without knowing it, as, every night, one enters upon sleep. One has no con-

sciousness of the passing of the last lucid thought into sleep, into swooning, into death. Evidently. But to be no more, to be here no more, to be ours no more ! Not even to be able, any more, to press against one's human heart, some idle afternoon, the ancient sadness contained in one little chord on the piano ! ”

In these always “lunar” parodies, *Salomé*, *Lohengrin*, *Fils de Parsifal*, *Persée et Andromède*, each a kind of metaphysical myth, he realises that *la créature va hardiment à être cérébrale, anti-naturelle*, and he has invented these / fantastic puppets with an almost Japanese art of spiritual dislocation. They are, in part, a way of taking one's revenge upon science, by an ironical borrowing of its very terms, which dance in his prose and verse, derisively, at the end of a string.

In his acceptance of the fragility of things as actually a principle of art, Laforgue is a sort of transformed Watteau, showing his disdain for the world which fascinates him, in quite a different way. He has constructed his own world, lunar and actual, speaking slang and astronomy, with a constant disengaging of the visionary aspect, under which frivolity becomes an escape from the arrogance of a still more temporary mode of being, the

world as it appears to the sober majority. He is terribly conscious of daily life, cannot omit, mentally, a single hour of the day; and his flight to the moon is in sheer desperation. He sees what he calls *l'Inconscient* in every gesture, but he cannot see it without these gestures. And he sees, not only as an imposition, but as a conquest, the possibilities for art which come from the sickly modern being, with his clothes, his nerves: the mere fact that he flowers from the soil of his epoch.

It is an art of the nerves, this art of Laforgue, and it is what all art would tend towards if we followed our nerves on all their journeys. There is in it all the restlessness of modern life, the haste to escape from whatever weighs too heavily on the liberty of the moment, that capricious liberty which demands only room enough to hurry itself weary. It is distressingly conscious of the unhappiness of mortality, but it plays, somewhat uneasily, at a disdainful indifference. And it is out of these elements of caprice, fear, contempt, linked together by an embracing laughter, that it makes its existence.

*Il n'y a pas de type, il y a la vie*, Laforgue replies to those who come to him with classical ideals. *Votre idéal est bien vite magnifiquement*

*submergé*, in life itself, which should form its own art, an art deliberately ephemeral, with the attaching pathos of passing things. There is a great pity at the root of this art of Laforgue: self-pity, which extends, with the artistic sympathy, through mere clearness of vision, across the world. His laughter, which Maeterlinck has defined so admirably as "the laughter of the soul," is the laughter of Pierrot, more than half a sob, and shaken out of him with a deplorable gesture of the thin arms, thrown wide. He is a metaphysical Pierrot, *Pierrot lunaire*, and it is of abstract notions, the whole science of the unconscious, that he makes his showman's patter. As it is part of his manner not to distinguish between irony and pity, or even belief, we need not attempt to do so. Heine should teach us to understand at least so much of a poet who could not otherwise resemble him less. In Laforgue, sentiment is squeezed out of the world before one begins to play at ball with it.

And so, of the two, he is the more hopeless. He has invented a new manner of being René or Werther: an inflexible politeness towards man, woman, and destiny. He composes love-poems hat in hand, and smiles with an exasperating tolerance before all the transformations of the eternal femi-



nine. He is very conscious of death, but his *blague* of death is, above all things, gentlemanly. He will not permit himself, at any moment, the luxury of dropping the mask : not at any moment.

Read this *Autre Complainte de Lord Pierrot*, with the singular pity of its cruelty, before such an imagined dropping of the mask :

*Celle qui doit me mettre au courant de la Femme !*

*Nous lui dirons d'abord, de mon air le moins froid :*

*"La somme des angles d'un triangle, chère âme,  
Est égale à deux droits."*

*Et si ce cri lui part : "Dieu de Dieu que je t'aime !"*

*—"Dieu reconnaîtra les siens." Ou piquée au vif :*

*—"Mes claviers ont du cœur, tu sera mon seul thème."*

*Moi : "Tout est relatif."*

*De tous ses yeux, alors ! se sentant trop banale :*

*"Ah ! tu ne m'aime pas ; tant d'autres sont jaloux !"*

*Et moi, d'un œil qui vers l'Inconscient s'emballe :*

*"Merci, pas mal ; et vous ?"*

*"Jouons au plus fidèle !" — A quoi bon, ô Nature !*

*"Autant à qui perd gagne." Alors, autre couplet :*

*—"Ah ! tu te lasserai le premier, j'en suis sûre."*

*—"Après vous, s'il vous plaît."*

*Enfin, si, par un soir, elle meurt dans mes livres,*

*Douce ; feignant de n'en pas croire encor mes yeux,*

*J'aurai un : "Ah ça, mais, nous avions De Quoi vivre !*

*C'était donc sérieux ?"*

And yet one realises, if one but reads him attentively enough, how much suffering and despair, and resignation to what is, after all, the inevitable, are hidden away under this disguise, and also why this disguise is possible. Laforgue died at twenty-seven: he had been a dying man all his life, and his work has the fatal evasiveness of those who shrink from remembering the one thing which they are unable to forget. Coming as he does after Rimbaud, turning the divination of the other into theories, into achieved results, he is the eternally grown up, mature to the point of self-negation, as the other is the eternal *enfant terrible*. He thinks intensely about life, seeing what is automatic, pathetically ludicrous in it, almost as one might who has no part in the comedy. He has the double advantage, for his art, of being condemned to death, and of being, in the admirable phrase of Villiers, "one of those who come into the world with a rav of moonlight in their brains."

STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ



## STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

### I

STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ was one of those who love literature too much to write it except by fragments ; in whom the desire of perfection brings its own defeat. With either more or less ambition he would have done more to achieve himself ; he was always divided between an absolute aim at the absolute, that is, the unattainable, and a too logical disdain for the compromise by which, after all, literature is literature. Carry the theories of Mallarmé to a practical conclusion, multiply his powers in a direct ratio, and you have Wagner. It is his failure not to be Wagner. And, Wagner having existed, it was for him to be something more, to complete Wagner. Well, not being able to be that, it was a matter of sincere indifference to him whether he left one or two little, limited master-

## 118 THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT

pieces of formal verse and prose, the more or the less. It was "the work" that he dreamed of, the new art, more than a new religion, whose precise form in the world he was never quite able to settle.

*Un auteur difficile*, in the phrase of M. Catulle Mendès, it has always been to what he himself calls "a labyrinth illuminated by flowers" that Mallarmé has felt it due to their own dignity to invite his readers. To their own dignity, and also to his. Mallarmé was obscure, not so much because he wrote differently, as because he thought differently, from other people. His mind was elliptical, and, relying with undue confidence on the intelligence of his readers, he emphasised the effect of what was unlike other people in his mind by resolutely ignoring even the links of connection that existed between them. Never having aimed at popularity, he never needed, as most writers need, to make the first advances. He made neither intrusion upon nor concession to those who, after all, were not obliged to read him. And when he spoke, he considered it neither needful nor seemly to listen in order to hear whether he was heard. To the charge of obscurity he replied, with sufficient disdain, that there are many who do not know how

to read—except the newspaper, he adds, in one of those disconcerting, oddly-printed parentheses, which make his work, to those who rightly apprehend it, so full of wise limitations, so safe from hasty or seemingly final conclusions. No one in our time has more significantly vindicated the supreme right of the artist in the aristocracy of letters; wilfully, perhaps, not always wisely, but nobly, logically. Has not every artist shrunk from that making of himself “a motley to the view,” that handing over of his naked soul to the laughter of the multitude? But who, in our time, has wrought so subtle a veil, shining on this side, where the few are, a thick cloud on the other, where are the many? The oracles have always had the wisdom to hide their secrets in the obscurity of many meanings, or of what has seemed meaningless; and might it not, after all, be the finest epitaph for a self-respecting man of letters to be able to say, even after the writing of many books: I have kept my secret, I have not betrayed myself to the multitude?

But to Mallarmé, certainly, there might be applied the significant warning of Rossetti:

*Yet woe to thee if once thou yield  
Unto the act of doing nought!*

After a life of persistent devotion to literature, he has left enough poems to make a single small volume (less, certainly, than a hundred poems in all), a single volume of prose, a few pamphlets, and a prose translation of the poems of Poe. It is because among these there are masterpieces, poems which are among the most beautiful poems written in our time, prose which has all the subtlest qualities of prose, that, quitting the abstract point of view, we are forced to regret the fatal enchantments, fatal for him, of theories which are so greatly needed by others, so valuable for our instruction, if we are only a little careful in putting them into practice.

In estimating the significance of Stéphane Mallarmé, it is necessary to take into account not only his verse and prose, but, almost more than these, the Tuesdays of the Rue de Rome, in which he gave himself freely to more than one generation. No one who has ever climbed those four flights of stairs will have forgotten the narrow, homely interior, elegant with a sort of scrupulous Dutch comfort; the heavy, carved furniture, the tall clock, the portraits, Manet's, Whistler's, on the walls; the table on which the china bowl, odorous with tobacco, was pushed from hand to hand; above all, the rocking-chair, Mallarmé's, from which he would



rise quietly, to stand leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece, while one hand, the hand which did not hold the cigarette, would sketch out one of those familiar gestures: *un peu de prêtre, un peu de danseuse* (in M. Rodenbach's admirable phrase), *avec lesquels il avait l'air chaque fois d'entrer dans la conversation, comme on entre en scène.* One of the best talkers of our time, he was, unlike most other fine talkers, harmonious with his own theories in giving no monologues, in allowing every liberty to his guests, to the conversation; in his perfect readiness to follow the slightest indication, to embroider upon any frame, with any material presented to him. There would have been something almost of the challenge of the improvisatore in this easily moved alertness of mental attitude, had it not been for the singular gentleness with which Mallarmé's intelligence moved, in these considerable feats, with the half-apologetic negligence of the perfect acrobat. He seemed to be no more than brushing the dust off your own ideas, settling, arranging them a little, before he gave them back to you, surprisingly luminous. It was only afterwards that you realised how small had been your own part in the matter, as well as what it meant to have enlightened without dazzling you.

But there was always the feeling of comradeship, the comradeship of a master, whom, while you were there at least, you did not question; and that very feeling lifted you, in your own estimation, nearer to art.

Invaluable, it seems to me, those Tuesdays must have been to the young men of two generations who have been making French literature; they were unique, certainly, in the experience of the young Englishman who was always so cordially received there, with so flattering a cordiality. Here was a house in which art, literature, was the very atmosphere, a religious atmosphere; and the master of the house, in his just a little solemn simplicity, a priest. I never heard the price of a book mentioned, or the number of thousand francs which a popular author had been paid for his last volume; here, in this one literary house, literature was unknown as a trade. And, above all, the questions that were discussed were never, at least, in Mallarmé's treatment, in his guidance of them, other than essential questions, considerations of art in the abstract, of literature before it coagulates into a book, of life as its amusing and various web spins the stuff of art. When, indeed, the conversation, by some untimely hazard, drifted too near

to one, became for a moment, perhaps inconveniently, practical, it was Mallarmé's solicitous politeness to wait, a little constrained, almost uneasy, rolling his cigarette in silence, until the disturbing moment had passed.

There were other disturbing moments, sometimes. I remember one night, rather late, the sudden irruption of M. de Heredia, coming on after a dinner-party, and seating himself, in his well-filled evening dress, precisely in Mallarmé's favourite chair. He was intensely amusing, voluble, floridly vehement; Mallarmé, I am sure, was delighted to see him; but the loud voice was a little trying to his nerves, and then he did not know what to do without his chair. He was like a cat that has been turned out of its favourite corner, as he roamed uneasily about the room, resting an unaccustomed elbow on the sideboard, visibly at a disadvantage.

For the attitude of those young men, some of them no longer exactly young, who frequented the Tuesdays, was certainly the attitude of the disciple. Mallarmé never exacted it, he seemed never to notice it; yet it meant to him, all the same, a good deal; as it meant, and in the best sense, a good deal to them. He loved art with a supreme disin-

terestedness, and it was for the sake of art that he wished to be really a master. For he knew that he had something to teach, that he had found out some secrets worth knowing, that he had discovered a point of view which he could to some degree perpetuate in those young men who listened to him. And to them this free kind of apprenticeship was, beyond all that it gave in direct counsels, in the pattern of work, a noble influence. Mallarmé's quiet, laborious life was for some of them the only counterpoise to the Bohemian example of the *d'Harcourt* or the *Taverne*, where art is loved, but with something of haste, in a very changing devotion. It was impossible to come away from Mallarmé's without some tranquillising influence from that quiet place, some impersonal ambition towards excellence, the resolve, at least, to write a sonnet, a page of prose, that should be in its own way as perfect as one could make it, worthy of Mallarmé.

## II

"Poetry," said Mallarmé, "is the language of a state of crisis"; and all his poems are the evocation of a passing ecstasy, arrested in mid-flight. This ecstasy is never the mere instinctive cry of the heart, the simple human joy or sorrow, which, like the Parnassians, but for not quite the same reason, he did not admit in poetry. It is a mental transposition of emotion or sensation, veiled with atmosphere, and becoming, as it becomes a poem, pure beauty. Here, for instance, in a poem which I have translated line for line, and almost word for word, a delicate emotion, a figure vaguely divined, a landscape magically evoked, blend in a single effect.

## SIGH.

*My soul, calm sister, towards thy brow, whereon scarce  
grieves*

*An autumn strewn already with its russet leaves,  
And towards the wandering sky of thine angelic eyes,  
Mounts, as in melancholy gardens may arise*

*Some faithful fountain sighing whitely towards the  
blue!*

*—Towards the blue pale and pure that sad October  
knew,*

## 126 THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT

*When, in those depths, it mirrored languors infinite,  
And agonising leaves upon the waters white,  
Windily drifting, traced a furrow cold and dun,  
Where, in one long last ray, lingered the yellow sun.*

Another poem comes a little closer to nature, but with what exquisite precautions, and with what surprising novelty in its unhesitating touch on actual things !

### SEA-WIND.

*The flesh is sad, alas ! and all the books are read.  
Flight, only flight ! I feel that birds are wild to tread  
The floor of unknown foam, and to attain the skies !  
Nought, neither ancient gardens mirrored in the eyes,  
Shall hold this heart that bathes in waters its delight,  
O nights ! nor yet my waking lamp, whose lonely light  
Shadows the vacant paper, whiteness profits best,  
Nor the young wife who rocks her baby on her breast.  
I will depart. O steamer, swaying rope and spar,  
Lift anchor for exotic lands that lie afar !  
A weariness, outworn by cruel hopes, still clings  
To the last farewell handkerchief's last beckonings !  
And are not these, the masts inviting storms, not these  
That an awakening wind bends over wrecking seas,  
Lost, not a sail, a sail, a flowering isle, ere long ?  
But, O my heart, hear thou, hear thou the sailors'  
song !*

These (need I say ?) belong to the earlier period, in which Mallarmé had not yet withdrawn his light

into the cloud ; and to the same period belong the prose-poems, one of which, perhaps the most exquisite, I will translate here.

“AUTUMN LAMENT

“Ever since Maria left me, for another star— which ? Orion, Altair, or thou, green Venus ?—I have always cherished solitude. How many long days I have passed, alone with my cat ! By *alone*, I mean without a material being, and my cat is a mystical companion, a spirit. I may say, then, that I have passed long days alone with my cat, and alone, with one of the last writers of the Roman decadence ; for since the white creature is no more, strangely and singularly, I have loved all that may be summed up in the word : fall. Thus, in the year, my favourite season is during those last languid summer days which come just before the autumn ; and, in the day, the hour when I take my walk is the hour when the sun lingers before fading, with rays of copper-yellow on the grey walls, and of copper-red on the window-panes. And, just so, the literature from which my soul demands delight must be the poetry dying out of the last moments of Rome, provided, nevertheless, that it breathes nothing of the rejuvenating approach

of the Barbarians, and does not stammer the infantile Latin of the first Christian prose.

"I read, then, one of those beloved poems (whose streaks of rouge have more charm for me than the fresh cheek of youth), and buried my hand in the fur of the pure animal, when a barrel-organ began to sing, languishingly and melancholy, under my window. It played in the long alley of poplars, whose leaves seem mournful to me even in spring, since Maria passed that way with the tapers, for the last time. Yes, sad people's instrument, truly: the piano glitters, the violin brings one's torn fibres to the light, but the barrel-organ, in the twilight of memory, has set me despairingly dreaming. While it murmured a gaily vulgar air, such as puts mirth into the heart of the suburbs, an old-fashioned, an empty air, how came it that its refrain went to my very soul, and made me weep like a romantic ballad? I drank it in, and I did not throw a penny out of the window, for fear of disturbing my own impression, and of perceiving that the instrument was not singing by itself."

Between these characteristic, clear, and beautiful poems, in verse and in prose, and the opaque darkness of the later writings, come one or two poems, perhaps the finest of all, in which already



clearness is "a secondary grace," but in which a subtle rapture finds incomparable expression. *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* and *Hérodiade* have already been introduced, in different ways, to English readers: the former by Mr. Gosse, in a detailed analysis; the second I have translated in the last number of the *Savoy*. In these two poems I find Mallarmé at the moment when his own desire achieves itself; when he attains Wagner's ideal, that "the most complete work of the poet should be that which, in its final achievement, becomes a perfect music": every word is a jewel, scattering and recapturing sudden fire, every image is a symbol, and the whole poem is visible music. After this point began that fatal "last period" which comes to most artists who have thought too curiously, or dreamed too remote dreams, or followed a too wandering beauty. Mallarmé had long been only too conscious that all publication is "almost a speculation, on one's modesty, for one's silence"; that "to unclench the fists, breaking one's sedentary dream, for a ruffling face to face with the idea," was after all unnecessary to his own conception of himself, a mere way of convincing the public that one exists; and having achieved, as he thought, "the right to abstain from doing any-

thing exceptional," he devoted himself, doubly, to silence. Seldom condescending to write, he wrote now only for himself, and in a manner which certainly saved him from intrusion. Some of Mr. Meredith's poems, and occasional passages of his prose, can alone give in English some faint idea of the later prose and verse of Mallarmé. The verse could not, I think, be translated; of the prose, in which an extreme lucidity of thought comes to us but glimmeringly through the entanglements of a construction, part Latin, part English, I shall endeavour to translate some fragments, in speaking of the theoretic writings, contained in the two volumes of *Vers et Prose* and *Divagations*.

### III

It is the distinction of Mallarmé to have aspired after an impossible liberation of the soul of literature from what is fretting and constraining in "the body of that death," which is the mere literature of words. Words, he has realised, are of value only as a notation of the free breath of the spirit; words, therefore, must be employed with an extreme care,

in their choice and adjustment, in setting them to reflect and chime upon one another, yet least of all for their own sake, for what they can never, except by suggestion, express. "Every soul is a melody," he has said, "which needs to be re-adjusted; and for that are the flute or viol of each." The word, treated indeed with a kind of "adoration," as he says, is so regarded in a magnificent sense, in which it is apprehended as a living thing, itself the vision rather than the reality; at least the philtre of the evocation. The word, chosen as he chooses it, is for him a liberating principle, by which the spirit is extracted from matter; takes form, perhaps assumes immortality. Thus an artificiality, even, in the use of words, that seeming artificiality which comes from using words as if they had never been used before, that chimerical search after the virginity of language, is but the paradoxical outward sign of an extreme discontent with even the best of their service. Writers who use words fluently, seeming to disregard their importance, do so from an unconscious confidence in their expressiveness, which the scrupulous thinker, the precise dreamer, can never place in the most carefully chosen among them. To evoke, by some elaborate, instantaneous magic of language.

without the formality of an after all impossible description; to be, rather than to express: that is what Mallarmé has consistently, and from the first, sought in verse and prose. And he has sought this wandering, illusive, beckoning butterfly, the soul of dreams, over more and more entangled ground; and it has led him into the depths of many forests, far from the sunlight. To say that he has found what he sought is impossible; but (is it possible to avoid saying?) how heroic a search, and what marvellous discoveries by the way!

I think I understand, though I cannot claim his own authority for my supposition, the way in which Mallarmé wrote verse, and the reason why it became more and more abstruse, more and more unintelligible. Remember his principle: that to name is to destroy, to suggest is to create. Note, further, that he condemns the inclusion in verse of anything but, "for example, the horror of the forest, or the silent thunder afloat in the leaves; not the intrinsic, dense wood of the trees." He has received, then, a mental sensation: let it be the horror of the forest. This sensation begins to form in his brain, at first probably no more than a rhythm, absolutely without words. Gradually thought begins to concentrate itself (but with an

extreme care, lest it should break the tension on which all depends) upon the sensation, already struggling to find its own consciousness. Delicately, stealthily, with infinitely timid precaution, words present themselves, at first in silence. Every word seems like a desecration, seems, the clearer it is, to throw back the original sensation farther and farther into the darkness. But, guided always by the rhythm, which is the executive soul (as, in Aristotle's definition, the soul is the form of the body), words come slowly, one by one, shaping the message. Imagine the poem already written down, at least composed. In its very imperfection, it is clear, it shows the links by which it has been riveted together ; the whole process of its construction can be studied. Now most writers would be content ; but with Mallarmé the work has only begun. In the final result there must be no sign of the making, there must be only the thing made. He works over it, word by word, changing a word here, for its colour, which is not precisely the colour required, a word there, for the break it makes in the music. A new image occurs to him rarer, subtler, than the one he has used ; the image is transferred. By the time the poem has reached as it seems to him, a flawless unity, the steps o

the progress have been only too effectually effaced ; and while the poet, who has seen the thing from the beginning, still sees the relation of point to point, the reader, who comes to it only in its final stage, finds himself in a not unnatural bewilderment. Pursue this manner of writing to its ultimate development ; start with an enigma, and then withdraw the key of the enigma ; and you arrive, easily, at the frozen impenetrability of those latest sonnets, in which the absence of all punctuation is scarcely a recognisable hindrance.

That, I fancy to myself, was his actual way of writing ; here, in what I prefer to give as a corollary, is the theory. " Symbolist, Decadent, or Mystic, the schools thus called by themselves, or thus hastily labelled by our information-press, adopt, for meeting-place, the point of an Idealism which (similarly as in fugues, in sonatas) rejects the ' natural ' materials, and, as brutal, a direct thought ordering them ; to retain no more than suggestion. To be instituted, a relation between images, exact ; and that therefrom should detach itself a third aspect, fusible and clear, offered to the divination. Abolished, the pretension, æsthetically an error, despite its dominion over almost all the masterpieces, to enclose within the subtle paper

other than, for example, the horror of the forest, or the silent thunder afloat in the leaves; not the intrinsic, dense wood of the trees. Some few bursts of personal pride, veridically trumpeted, awaken the architecture of the palace, alone habitable; not of stone, on which the pages would close but ill." For example (it is his own): "I say: a flower! and out of the oblivion to which my voice consigns every contour, so far as anything save the known calyx, musically arises, idea, and exquisite, the one flower absent from all bouquets." "The pure work," then, "implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who yields place to the words, immobilised by the shock of their inequality; they take light from mutual reflection, like an actual trail of fire over precious stones, replacing the old lyric afflatus or the enthusiastic personal direction of the phrase." "The verse which out of many vocables remakes an entire word, new, unknown to the language, and as if magical, attains this isolation of speech." Whence, it being "music which rejoins verse, to form, since Wagner, Poetry," the final conclusion: "That we are now precisely at the moment of seeking, before that breaking up of the large rhythms of literature, and their scattering in articulate, almost instrumental, nervous waves, an

art which shall complete the transposition, into the Book, of the symphony, or simply recapture our own : for, it is not in elementary sonorities of brass, strings, wood, unquestionably, but in the intellectual word at its utmost, that, fully and evidently, we should find, drawing to itself all the correspondences of the universe, the supreme Music."

Here, literally translated, in exactly the arrangement of the original, are some passages out of the theoretic writings, which I have brought together, to indicate what seem to me the main lines of Mallarmé's doctrine. It is the doctrine which, as I have already said, had been divined by Gérard de Nerval ; but what, in Gérard, was pure vision, becomes in Mallarmé a logical sequence of meditation. Mallarmé was not a mystic, to whom anything came unconsciously ; he was a thinker, in whom an extraordinary subtlety of mind was exercised on always explicit, though by no means the common, problems. " A seeker after something in the world, that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all," he pursued his search with unwearying persistence, with a sharp mental division of dream and idea, certainly very lucid to himself, however he may have failed to render his expression



clear to others. And I, for one, cannot doubt that he was, for the most part, entirely right in his statement and analysis of the new conditions under which we are now privileged or condemned to write. His obscurity was partly his failure to carry out the spirit of his own directions ; but, apart from obscurity, which we may all be fortunate enough to escape, is it possible for a writer, at the present day, to be quite simple, with the old, objective simplicity, in either thought or expression? To be *naïf*, to be archaic, is not to be either natural or simple ; I affirm that is not natural to be what is called " natural " any longer. We have no longer the mental attitude of those to whom a story was but a story, and all stories good ; we have realised, since it was proved to us by Poe, not merely that the age of epics is past, but that no long poem was ever written ; the finest long poem in the world being but a series of short poems linked together by prose. And, naturally, we can no longer write what we can no longer accept. Symbolism, implicit in all literature from the beginning, as it is implicit in the very words we use, comes to us now, at last quite conscious of itself, offering us the only escape from our many imprisonments. We find a new, an older, sense in the so worn out forms of things

the world, which we can no longer believe in as the satisfying material object it was to our grandparents, becomes transfigured with a new light; words, which long usage had darkened almost out of recognition, take fresh lustre. And it is on the lines of that spiritualising of the word, that perfecting of form in its capacity for allusion and suggestion, that confidence in the eternal correspondences between the visible and the invisible universe, which Mallarmé taught, and too intermittently practised, that literature must now move, if it is in any sense to move forward.

## HUYSMANS AS A SYMBOLIST



## HUYSMANS AS A SYMBOLIST

IN the preface to his first novel, *Marthe : histoire d'une fille*, more than twenty years ago, Huysmans defined his theory of art in this defiant phrase : "I write what I see, what I feel, and what I have experienced, and I write it as well as I can : that is all." Only five or six years ago, he could still say, in answer to an interviewer who asked him his opinion of Naturalism : "At bottom, there are writers who have talent and others who have not ; let them be Naturalists, Romantics, Decadents, what you will, it is all the same to me : I only want to know if they have talent." Such theoretical liberality, in a writer of original talent, is a little disconcerting : it means that he is without a theory of his own, that he is not yet conscious of having chosen his own way. And, indeed, it is only with *En Route* that Huysmans can be said to have discovered the direction in which he had really been travelling from the beginning. In *Là-Bas*, which

is a sort of false start, he had, indeed, realised, though for himself, at that time, ineffectually, that "it is essential to preserve the veracity of the document, the precision of detail, the fibrous and nervous language of Realism, but it is equally essential to become the well-digger of the soul, and not to attempt to explain what is mysterious by mental maladies. . . . It is essential, in a word, to follow the great road so deeply dug out by Zola, but it is necessary also to trace a parallel pathway in the air, and to grapple with the within and the after, to create, in a word, a spiritual Naturalism." This is almost a definition of the art of *En Route*, where this spiritual realism is applied to the history of a soul, a conscience; in a later novel, *La Cathédrale*, the method has still further developed, and Huysmans becomes, for the first time, a pure Symbolist. *La Cathédrale* is still concerned with the same sensitive, lethargic, persevering soul, but it is concerned with it in one of its longest halts by the way, as it undergoes the slow, permeating influence of *la cathédrale mystique par excellence*, the cathedral of Chartres. And the greater part of the book is taken up with a study of this cathedral, of that elaborate and profound symbolism by which "the soul of sanctuaries" slowly reveals itself *Quel*

*laconisme hermétique*!) with a sort of parallel interpretation of the symbolism which the Church of the Middle Ages concealed or revealed in colours, precious stones, plants, animals, numbers, odours, and in the Bible itself, in the setting together of the Old and New Testaments. Then there is a study of religious art, of Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin* in the Louvre, which is a patient disentangling of the actual signification of its colours, of Roger van de Weyden and the early Flemish painters, with a superb page on Rembrandt and his hallucinatory realism. Some of the finest pages in the book are those on David and the Hebrew Prophets, on King Solomon, on the prefiguration of Christ, the Virgin, and the Church, in the narratives and poems of the Old Testament. No doubt, to some extent, this book is less interesting than *En Route*, in the exact proportion in which everything in the world is less interesting than the human soul. There are times when Durtal is almost forgotten, and, unjustly enough, it may seem as if we are given this archæology, these Bestiaries, for their own sake. To fall into this error is to mistake the whole purpose of the book, the whole extent of the discovery in art which Huysmans has been one of the first to make.

The old conception of the novel as an amusing tale of adventures, though it has still its apologists in England, has long since ceased in France to mean anything more actual than powdered wigs and lace ruffles. Like children who cry to their elders for "a story, a story," the English public still wants its plot, its heroine, its villain. That the novel should be psychological was a discovery as early as Benjamin Constant, whose *Adolphe* anticipates *Le Rouge et le Noir*, that somewhat arid masterpiece of Stendhal. But that psychology could be carried so far into the darkness of the soul, that the flaming walls of the world themselves faded to a glimmer, was a discovery which had been made by no novelist before Huysmans wrote *En Route*. At once the novel showed itself capable of competing, on their own ground, with poetry, with the great "confessions," with philosophy. *En Route* is perhaps the first novel which does not set out with the aim of amusing its readers. It offers you no more entertainment than *Paradise Lost* or the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, and it is possible to consider it on the same level. The novel, which, after having chronicled the adventures of the Vanity Fairs of this world, had set itself with admirable success to analyse the amorous and



ambitious and money-making intelligence of the conscious and practical self, sets itself at last to the final achievement: the revelation of the sub-con-  
scious self, no longer the intelligence, but the soul. Here, then, purged of the distraction of incident, liberated from the bondage of a too realistic conversation, in which the aim had been to convey the very gesture of breathing life, internalised to a complete liberty, in which, just because it is so absolutely free, art is able to accept, without limiting itself, the expressive medium of a convention, we have in the novel a new form, which may be at once a confession and a decoration, the soul and a pattern.

And so, in *La Cathédrale*, Huysmans does but carry further the principle which he had perceived in *En Route*, showing, as he does, how inert matter, the art of stones, the growth of plants, the uncon-  
scious life of beasts, may be brought under the same law of the soul, may obtain, through symbol, a spiritual existence. He is thus but extending the domain of the soul, while he may seem to be limiting or ignoring it; and Durtal may well stand aside for a moment, in at least the energy of contemplation, while he sees, with a new understanding, the very sight of his eyes, the very stuff

of his thoughts, taking life before him, a life of the same substance as his own. What is Symbolism if not an establishing of the links which hold the world together, the affirmation of an eternal, minute, intricate, almost invisible life, which runs through the whole universe? Every age has its own symbols, but, a symbol once perfectly expressed, that symbol remains; as Gothic architecture remains, the very soul of the Middle Ages. To get at that truth which is all but the deepest meaning of beauty, to find that symbol which is its most adequate expression, is in itself a kind of creation; and that is what Huysmans does for us in *La Cathédrale*. More and more he has put aside all the profane and accessible and outward pomp of writing, for an inner and more severe beauty of perfect truth. He has come to realise that truth can be reached and revealed only by symbol. Hence, all that description, that heaping up of detail, that passionately patient elaboration: all means to an end, not, as you may hastily incline to think, ends in themselves.

| It is curious to observe how often an artist perfects a particular means of expression long before he has any notion of what to do with it. Huysmans began by acquiring so astonishing a

mastery of description that he could describe the inside of a cow hanging in a butcher's shop as beautifully as if it were a casket of jewels. The little work-girls of his early novels were taken for long walks, in which they would have seen nothing but the arm on which they leant and the milliners' shops which they passed; and what they did not see was described, marvelously, in twenty pages. Now all that acquired power suddenly finds its use; for the idea has been found, and the idea, which alone can give value and coherence to all these observations, is like the sun which flashes into unity, into meaning, into evident beauty, the intelligible lozenges of colour, the inextricable trails of lead, which go to make up the picture in one of the painted windows of his own cathedral. Perhaps no one has ever described with such minuteness of line and colour as Huysmans, and his very defect, a certain lack of restraint, a certain heaviness of rhythm, which prevents his sentences from ever pleasing the ear like the sentences of Gautier, of Baudelaire, of Flaubert, gives him an advantage in conveying to the eye what he has seen with the eye. What, for instance, could be more precise in its translation of the different aspects under which the cathedral of Chartres can be seen, merely as

colour, than this one sentence : " Seen as a whole, under a clear sky, its grey silvers, and, if the sun shines upon it, turns pale yellow and then golden ; seen close, its skin is like that of a nibbled biscuit, with its silicious limestone eaten into holes ; som-  
times, when the sun is setting, it turns crimson, and rises up like a monstrous and delicate shrine, rose and green ; and, at twilight, turns blue, then seems to evaporate as it fades into violet." Or, again, in a passage which comes nearer to the conventional idea of eloquence, how absolute an avoidance of a conventional phrase, a word used for its merely oratorical value : " High up, in space, like salamanders, human beings, with burning faces and flaming robes, lived in a firmament of fire ; but these conflagrations were circumscribed, limited by an incombustible frame of darker glass, which beat back the clear young joy of the flames ; by that kind of melancholy, that more serious and more aged aspect, which is taken by the duller colours. The hue and cry of reds, the limpid security of whites, the reiterated halleluias of yellows, the vir-  
ginal glory of blues, all the quivering hearth-glow of painted glass, died away as it came near this border coloured with the rust of iron, with the russet of sauce, with the harsh violet of sandstone,

with bottle-green, with the brown of touchwood, with sooty black, with ashen grey."

This, in its excess of exactitude (a truly mediæval quality) becomes, on one page, a comparison of the tower without a spire to an unsharpened pencil which cannot write the prayers of earth upon the sky. But, for the most part, it is a consistent humanising of too objectively visible things, a disengaging of the sentiment which exists in them, which is one of the secrets of their appeal to us, but which for the most part we overlook as we set ourselves to add up the shapes and colours that have enchanted us. To Huysmans this artistic discovery has come, perhaps in the most effectual way, but certainly in the way least probable in these days, through faith, a definite religious faith; so that, beginning tentatively, he has come, at last, to believe in the Catholic Church as a monk of the Middle Ages believed in it. And there is no doubt that to Huysmans this abandonment to religion has brought, among other gifts, a certain human charity in which he was notably lacking, removing at once one of his artistic limitations. It has softened his contempt of humanity, it has broadened his outlook on the world. And the sense, diffused through the whole of this book, of

the living and beneficent reality of the Virgin, of her real presence in the cathedral built in her honour and after her own image, brings a strange and touching kind of poetry into these closely and soberly woven pages. We know that the finest imaginative work can be built only out of the primary emotions. Here, then, is a novelist who has obtained complete mastery over one of the primary emotions, precisely because it has obtained complete mastery over his own soul: the emotion of faith.

## MAETERLINCK AS A MYSTIC





## MAETERLINCK AS A MYSTIC

THE secret of things which is just beyond the most subtle words, the secret of the expressive silences, has always been clearer to Maeterlinck than to most people; and, in his plays, he has elaborated an art of sensitive, taciturn, and at the same time highly ornamental simplicity, which has come nearer than any other art to being the voice of silence. To Maeterlinck the theatre has been, for the most part, no more than one of the disguises by which he can express himself, and with his book of meditations on the inner life, *Le Trésor des Humbles*, he may seemed to have dropped his disguise.

All art hates the vague; not the mysterious, but the vague; two opposites very commonly confused, as the secret with the obscure, the infinite with the indefinite. And the artist who is also a mystic hates the vague with a more profound hatred than

any other artist. Thus Maeterlinck, endeavouring to clothe mystical conceptions in concrete form, has invented a drama so precise, so curt, so arbitrary in its limits, that it can safely be confided to the masks and feigned voices of marionettes. His theatre of artificial beings, who are at once more ghostly and more mechanical than the living actors whom we are accustomed to see, in so curious a parody of life, moving with a certain freedom of action across the stage, may be taken as itself a symbol of the aspect under which what we fantastically term "real life" presents itself to the mystic. Are we not all puppets, in a theatre of marionettes, in which the parts we play, the dresses we wear, the very emotion whose dominance gives its express form to our faces, have all been chosen for us; in which I, it may be, with curled hair and a Spanish cloak, play the romantic lover, sorely against my will, while you, a "fair penitent" for no repented sin, pass whitely under a nun's habit? And as our parts have been chosen for us, our motions controlled from behind the curtain, so the words we seem to speak are but spoken through us, and we do but utter fragments of some elaborate invention, planned for larger ends than our personal display or convenience, but to which, all the same,

we are in a humble degree necessary. This symbolical theatre, its very existence being a symbol, has perplexed many minds, to some of whom it has seemed puerile, 'a child's mystification of small words and repetitions, a thing of attitudes and omissions; while others, yet more unwisely, have compared it with the violent, rhetorical, most human drama of the Elizabethans, with Shakespeare himself, to whom all the world was a stage, and the stage all this world, certainly. A sentence, already famous, of the *Trésor des Humbles*, will tell you what it signifies to Maeterlinck himself.

"I have come to believe," he writes, in *Le Tragique Quotidien*, "that an old man seated in his armchair, waiting quietly under the lamplight, listening without knowing it to all the eternal laws which reign about his house, interpreting without understanding it all that there is in the silence of doors and windows, and in the little voice of light, enduring the presence of his soul and of his destiny, bowing his head a little, without suspecting that all the powers of the earth intervene and stand on guard in the room like attentive servants, not knowing that the sun itself suspends above the abyss the little table on which he rests his elbow, and that there is not a star in the sky nor a force in the

soul which is indifferent to the motion of a falling eyelid or a rising thought—I have come to believe that this motionless old man lived really a more profound, human, and universal life than the lover who strangles his mistress, the captain who gains a victory, or the husband who ‘avenges his honour.’”

That, it seems to me, says all there is to be said of the intention of this drama which Maeterlinck has evoked; and, of its style, this other sentence, which I take from the same essay: “It is only the words that at first sight seem useless which really count in a work.”

This drama, then, is a drama founded on philosophical ideas, apprehended emotionally; on the sense of the mystery of the universe, of the weakness of humanity, that sense which Pascal expressed when he said: *Ce qui m'étonne le plus est de voir que tout le monde n'est pas étonné de sa faiblesse*; with an acute feeling of the pathetic ignorance in which the souls nearest to one another look out upon their neighbours. It is a drama in which the interest is concentrated on vague people, who are little parts of the universal consciousness, their strange names being but the pseudonyms of obscure passions, intimate emotions. They have the fascination which we find in the eyes of certain

pictures, so much more real and disquieting, so much more permanent with us, than living people. And they have the touching simplicity of children; they are always children in their ignorance of themselves, of one another, and of fate. And, because they are so disembodied of the more trivial accidents of life, they give themselves without limitation to whatever passionate instinct possesses them. I do not know a more passionate love-scene than that scene in the wood beside the fountain, where Pelléas and Mélisande confess the strange burden which has come upon them. When the soul gives itself absolutely to love, all the barriers of the world are burnt away, and all its wisdom and subtlety are as incense poured on a flame. Morality too, is burnt away, no longer exists, any more than it does for children or for God.

Maeterlinck has realised, better than any one else the significance, in life and art, of mystery. He has realised how unsearchable is the darkness out of which we have but just stepped, and the darkness into which we are about to pass. And he has realised how the thought and sense of that twofold, darkness invade the little space of light in which, for a moment, we move; the depth to which they shadow our steps, even in that moment's partial

escape. But in some of his plays he would seem to have apprehended this mystery as a thing merely or mainly terrifying, the actual physical darkness surrounding blind men, the actual physical approach of death as the intruder; he has shown us people huddled at a window, out of which they are almost afraid to look, or beating at a door, the opening of which they dread. Fear shivers through these plays, creeping across our nerves like a damp mist coiling up out of a valley. And there is beauty, certainly, in this "vague spiritual fear"; but certainly a lower kind of beauty than that which gives its profound pathos to *Aglavaine et Sélysette*, the one play written since the writing of the essays. Here is mystery, which is also pure beauty, in these delicate approaches of intellectual pathos, in which suffering and death and error become transformed into something almost happy, so full is it of strange light.

And the aim of Maeterlinck, in his plays, is not only to render the soul and the soul's atmosphere, but to reveal this strangeness, pity, and beauty through beautiful pictures. No dramatist has ever been so careful that his scenes should be in themselves beautiful, or has made the actual space of forest, tower, or seashore so emotionally significant.

He has realised, after Wagner, that the art of the stage is the art of pictorial beauty, of the correspondence in rhythm between the speakers, their words, and their surroundings. He has seen how, in this way, and in this way alone, the emotion, which it is but a part of the poetic drama to express, can be at once intensified and purified.

It is only after hinting at many of the things which he had to say in these plays, which have, after all, been a kind of subterfuge, that Maeterlinck has cared, or been able, to speak with the direct utterance of the essays. And what may seem curious is that this prose of the essays, which is, the prose of a doctrine, is incomparably more beautiful than the prose of the plays, which was the prose of an art. Holding on this point a different opinion from one who was, in many senses, his master, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, he did not admit that beauty of words, or even any expressed beauty of thoughts, had its place in spoken dialogue, even though it was not two living actors speaking to one another on the stage, but a soul speaking to a soul, and imagined speaking through the mouths of marionettes. But that beauty of phrase which makes the profound and sometimes obscure pages of *Axel* shine as with the crossing fire of jewels,

rejoices us, though with a softer, a more equable, radiance, in the pages of these essays, in which every sentence has the indwelling beauty of an intellectual emotion, preserved at the same height of tranquil ecstasy from first page to last. There is a sort of religious calm in these deliberate sentences, into which the writer has known how to introduce that divine monotony which is one of the accomplishments of great style. Never has simplicity been more ornate, or a fine beauty more visible through its self-concealment.

But, after all, the claim upon us of this book is not the claim of a work of art, but of a doctrine, and more than that, of a system. Belonging, as he does, to the eternal hierarchy, the unbroken succession, of the mystics, Maeterlinck has apprehended what is essential in the mystical doctrine with a more profound comprehension, and thus more systematically, than any mystic of recent times. He has many points of resemblance with Emerson, on whom he has written an essay which is properly an exposition of his own personal ideas; but Emerson, who proclaimed the supreme guidance of the inner light, the supreme necessity of trusting instinct, of honouring emotion, did but proclaim all this, not without a certain anti-mystical vagueness: Maeter-



linck has systematised it. A more profound mystic than Emerson, he has greater command of that which comes to him unawares, is less at the mercy of visiting angels.

Also, it may be said that he surrenders himself to them more absolutely, with less reserve and discretion ; and, as he has infinite leisure, his contemplation being subject to no limits of time, he is ready to follow them on unknown rounds, to any distance, in any direction, ready also to rest in any wayside inn, without fearing that he will have lost the road on the morrow.

This old gospel, of which Maeterlinck is the new voice, has been quietly waiting until certain bankruptcies, the bankruptcy of Science, of the Positive Philosophies, should allow it full credit. Considering the length even of time, it has not had an unreasonable space of waiting ; and remember that it takes time but little into account. We have seen many little gospels demanding of every emotion, of every instinct, "its certificate at the hand of some respectable authority." Without confidence in themselves or in things, and led by Science, which is as if one were led by one's note-book, they demand a reasonable explanation of every mystery. Not finding that explanation, they reject the

mystery; which is as if the fly on the wheel rejected the wheel because it was hidden from his eyes by the dust of his own raising

The mystic is at once the proudest and the humblest of men. He is as a child who resigns himself to the guidance of an unseen hand, the hand of one walking by his side; he resigns himself with the child's humility. And he has the pride of the humble, a pride manifesting itself in the calm rejection of every accepted map of the roads, of every offer of assistance, of every painted signpost pointing out the smoothest ways on which to travel. He demands no authority for the unseen hand whose fingers he feels upon his wrist. He conceives of life, not, indeed, so much as a road on which one walks, very much at one's own discretion, but as a blown and wandering ship, surrounded by a sea from which there is no glimpse of land; and he conceives that to the currents of that sea he may safely trust himself. Let his hand, indeed, be on the rudder, there will be no miracle worked for him; it is enough miracle that the sea should be there, and the ship, and he himself. He will never know why his hand should turn the rudder this way rather than that.

Jacob Boehme has said, very subtly, "that man

does not perceive the truth, but God perceives the truth in man"; that is, that whatever we perceive or do is not perceived or done consciously by us, but unconsciously through us. Our business, then, is to tend that "inner light" by which most mystics have symbolised that which at once guides us in time and attaches us to eternity. This inner light is no miraculous descent of the Holy Spirit, but the perfectly natural, though it may finally be overcoming, ascent of the spirit within us. The spirit, in all men, being but a ray of the universal light, it can, by careful tending, by the removal of all obstruction, the cleansing of the vessel, the trimming of the wick, as it were, be increased, made to burn with a steadier, a brighter flame. In the last rapture it may become dazzling, may blind the watcher with excess of light, shutting him in within the circle of transfiguration, whose extreme radiance will leave all the rest of the world henceforth one darkness.

All mystics being concerned with what is divine in life, with the laws which apply equally to time and eternity, it may happen to one to concern himself chiefly with time seen under the aspect of eternity, to another to concern himself rather with eternity seen under the aspect of time. Thus many

mystics have occupied themselves, very profitably, with showing how natural, how explicable on their own terms, are the mysteries of life; the whole aim of Maeterlinck is to show how mysterious all life is, "what an astonishing thing it is, merely to live." What he had pointed out to us, with certain solemn gestures, in his plays, he sets himself now to affirm, slowly, fully, with that "confidence in mystery" of which he speaks. Because "there is not an hour without its familiar miracles and its ineffable suggestions," he sets himself to show us these miracles and these meanings where others have not always sought or found them, in women, in children, in the theatre. He seems to touch, at one moment or another, whether he is discussing *La Beauté Intérieure* or *Le Tragique Quotidien*, on all of these hours, and there is no hour so dark that his touch does not illuminate it. And it is characteristic of him, of his "confidence in mystery," that he speaks always without raising his voice, without surprise or triumph, or the air of having said anything more than the simplest observation. He speaks, not as if he knew more than others, or had sought out more elaborate secrets, but as if he had listened more attentively.

Loving most those writers "whose works

are nearest to silence," he begins his book, significantly, with an essay on Silence, an essay which, like all these essays, has the reserve, the expressive reticence, of those "active silences" of which he succeeds in revealing a few of the secrets.

"Souls," he tells us, "are weighed in silence, as gold and silver are weighed in pure water, and the words which we pronounce have no meaning except through the silence in which they are bathed. We seek to know that we may learn not to know"; knowledge, that which can be known by the pure reason, metaphysics, "indispensable" on this side of the "frontiers," being after all precisely what is least essential to us, since least essentially ourselves. "We possess a self more profound and more boundless than the self of the passions or of pure reason. . . . There comes a moment when the phenomena of our customary consciousness, what we may call the consciousness of the passions, or of our normal relationships, no longer mean anything to us, no longer touch our real life. I admit that this consciousness is often interesting in its way, and that it is often necessary to know it thoroughly. But it is a surface plant, and its roots

fear the great central fire of our being. I may commit a crime without the least breath stirring the tiniest flame of this fire ; and, on the other hand, the crossing of a single glance, a thought which never comes into being, á minute which passes without the utterance of a word, may rouse it into terrible agitations in the depths of its retreat, and cause it to overflow upon my life. Our soul does not judge as we judge ; it is a capricious and hidden thing. It can be reached by a breath and unconscious of a tempest. Let us find out what reaches it ; everything is there, for it is there that we ourselves are."

And it is towards this point that all the words of this book tend. Maeterlinck, unlike most men ("What is man but a God who is afraid?"), is not "miserly of immortal things" He utters the most divine secrets without fear, betraying certain hiding-places of the soul in those most nearly inaccessible retreats which lie nearest to us. All that he says we know already ; we may deny it, but we know it. It is what we are not often at leisure enough with ourselves, sincere enough with ourselves, to realise ; what we often dare not realise ; but, when he says it, we know

that it is true, and our knowledge of it is his warrant for saying it. He is what he is precisely because he tells us nothing which we do not already know, or, it may be, what we have known and forgotten.

The mystic, let it be remembered, has nothing in common with the moralist. He speaks only to those who are already prepared to listen to him, and he is indifferent to the "practical" effect which these or others may draw from his words. A young and profound mystic of our day has figured the influence of wise words upon the foolish and headstrong as "torches thrown into a burning city." The mystic knows well that it is not always the soul of the drunkard or the blasphemer which is farthest from the eternal beauty. He is concerned only with that soul of the soul, that life of life, with which the day's doings have so little to do; itself a mystery, and at home only among those supreme mysteries which surround it like an atmosphere. It is not always that he cares that his message, or his vision, may be as clear to others as it is to himself. But, because he is an artist, and not only a philosopher, Maeterlinck has taken especial pains that not a word of his may go astray,

and there is not a word of this book which needs to be read twice, in order that it may be understood, by the least trained of attentive readers. It is, indeed, as he calls it, "The Treasure of the Lowly."



## CONCLUSION



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OUR only chance, in this world, of a complete happiness, lies in the measure of our success in shutting the eyes of the mind, and deadening its sense of hearing, and dulling the keenness of its apprehension of the unknown. Knowing so much less than nothing, for we are entrapped in smiling and many-coloured appearances, our life may seem to be but a little space of leisure, in which it will be the necessary business of each of us to speculate on what is so rapidly becoming the past and so rapidly becoming the future, that scarcely existing present which is after all our only possession. Yet, as the present passes from us, hardly to be enjoyed except as memory or as hope, and only with an at best partial recognition of the uncertainty or inutility of both, it is with a kind of terror that we wake up, every now and then, to the whole knowledge of our ignorance, and to some perception

of where it is leading us. To live through a single day with that overpowering consciousness of our real position, which, in the moments in which alone it mercifully comes, is like blinding light or the thrust of a flaming sword, would drive any man out of his senses. It is our hesitations, the excuses of our hearts, the compromises of our intelligence, which save us. We can forget so much, we can bear suspense with so fortunate an evasion of its real issues; we are so admirably finite.

And so there is a great, silent conspiracy between us to forget death; all our lives are spent in busily forgetting death. That is why we are active about so many things which we know to be unimportant; why we are so afraid of solitude, and so thankful for the company of our fellow-creatures. Allowing ourselves, for the most part, to be but vaguely conscious of that great suspense in which we live, we find our escape from its sterile, annihilating reality in many dreams, in religion, passion, art; each a forgetfulness, each a symbol of creation; religion being the creation of a new heaven, passion the creation of a new earth, and art, in its mingling of heaven and earth, the creation of heaven out of earth. Each is a kind of sublime selfishness, the saint, the lover, and the artist having each an

incommunicable ecstasy which he esteems as his ultimate attainment, however, in his lower moments, he may serve God in action, or do the will of his mistress, or minister to men by showing them a little beauty. But it is, before all things, an escape; and the prophets who have redeemed the world, and the artists who have made the world beautiful, and the lovers who have quickened the pulses of the world, have really, whether they knew it or not, been fleeing from the certainty of one thought: that we have, all of us, only our one day; and from the dread of that other thought: that the day, however used, must after all be wasted.

The fear of death is not cowardice; it is, rather, an intellectual dissatisfaction with an enigma which has been presented to us, and which can be solved only when its solution is of no further use. All we have to ask of death is: what is life? and we are waiting all through life to ask that question. That life should be happy or unhappy, as those words are used, means so very little; and the heightening or lessening of the general felicity of the world means so little to any individual. There is something almost vulgar in happiness which does not become joy, and joy is an ecstasy which can rarely be maintained in the soul for more than the

moment during which we recognise that it is not sorrow. Only very young people want to be happy. What we all want is to be quite sure that there is something which makes it worth while to go on living, in what seems to us our best way, at our finest intensity; something beyond the mere fact that we are satisfying a sort of inner logic (which may be quite faulty) and that we get our best makeshift for happiness on that so hazardous assumption.

Well, the doctrine of Mysticism, with which all this symbolical literature has so much to do, of which it is all so much the expression, presents us, not with a guide for conduct, not with a plan for our happiness, not with an explanation of any mystery, but with a theory of life which makes us familiar with mystery, and which seems to harmonise those instincts which make for religion, passion, and art, freeing us at once of a great bondage. The final uncertainty remains, but we seem to knock less helplessly at closed doors, coming so much closer to the once terrifying eternity of things about us, as we come to look upon these things as shadows, through which we have our shadowy passage. "For in the particular acts of human life," Plotinus tells us, "it is not the interior soul

and the true man, but the exterior shadow of the man alone, which laments and weeps, performing his part on the earth as in a more ample and extended scene, in which many shadows of souls and phantom scenes appear." And as we realise the identity of a poem, a prayer, or a kiss, in that spiritual universe which we are weaving for ourselves, each out of a thread of the great fabric; as we realise the infinite insignificance of action, its immense distance from the current of life; as we realise the delight of feeling ourselves carried onward by forces which it is our wisdom to obey; it is at least with a certain relief that we turn to an ancient doctrine, so much the more likely to be true because it has so much the air of a dream. On this theory alone does all life become worth living, all art worth making, all worship worth offering. And because it might slay as well as save, because the freedom of its sweet captivity might so easily become deadly to the fool, because that is the hardest path to walk in where you are told only, walk well; it is perhaps the only counsel of perfection which can ever really mean much to the artist.





## BIBLIOGRAPHY AND NOTES



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THE essays contained in this book are not intended to give information. They are concerned with ideas rather than with facts ; each is a study of a problem, only in part a literary one, in which I have endeavoured to consider writers as personalities under the action of spiritual forces, or as themselves so many forces. But it has seemed to me that readers have a right to demand information in regard to writers who are so often likely to be unfamiliar to them. I have therefore given a bibliography of the works of each writer with whom I have dealt, and I have added a number of notes, giving various particulars which I think are likely to be useful in fixing more definitely the personal characteristics of these writers.

## GÉRARD DE NERVAL

(1808—1855)

*Napoléon et la France Guerrière, élégies nationales*, 1826; *La mort de Talma*, 1826; *L'Académie, ou les Membres Introuvables, comédie satirique en vers*, 1826; *Napoléon et Talma, élégies nationales nouvelles*, 1826; *M. Dentscourt, ou le Cuisinier Grand Homme*, 1826; *Élégies Nationales et Satires Politiques*, 1827; *Faust, tragédie de Goethe*, 1828 (suivi du second *Faust*, 1840); *Couronne Poétique de Béranger*, 1828; *Le Peuple, ode*, 1830; *Poésies Allemandes, Morceaux choisis et traduits*, 1830; *Choix de Poésies de Ronsard et de Regnier*, 1830; *Nos Adieux à la Chambre de Députés de l'an 1830*, 1831; *Lénore, traduite de Burger*, 1835; *Piquillo, opéra comique* (with Dumas), 1837; *L'Alchimiste, drame en vers* (with Dumas), 1839; *Léo Burckhardt, drame en prose* (with Dumas), 1839; *Scènes de la Vie Orientale*, 2 vols., 1848—1850; *Les Monténégrins, opéra comique* (with Alboize), 1849; *Le Chariot d'Enfant, drame en vers* (with Méry), 1850; *Les Nuits du Ramadan*, 1850; *Voyage en Orient*, 1851; *L'Imagier de Harlem*,

*légende en prose et en vers* (with Méry and Bernard Lopez), 1852; *Contes et Facéties*, 1852; *Lorely, souvenirs d'Allemagne*, 1852; *Les Illuminés*, 1852; *Petits Châteaux de Bohême*, 1853; *Les Filles du Feu*, 1854; *Misanthropie et Repentir, drame de Kotzebue*, 1855; *La Bohême galante*, 1855; *Le Rêve et la Vie: Aurélia*, 1855; *Le Marquis de Fayolle* (with E. Gorges), 1856; *Œuvres Complètes*, 6 vols. (1, *Les Deux Faust de Goethe*; 2, 3, *Voyage en Orient*; 4, *Les Illuminés, Les Faux Sauviers*; 5, *Le Rêve et la Vie, Les Filles du Feu, La Bohême galante*; 6, *Poésies Complètes*), 1867.

The sonnets, written at different periods and never published during the lifetime of Gérard, are contained in the volume of *Poésies Complètes*, where they are imbedded in the midst of deplorable juvenilia. All, or almost all, of the verse worth preserving was collected, in 1897, by that delicate amateur of the curiosities of beauty, M. Remy de Gourmont, in a tiny volume called *Les Chimères*, which contains the seven sonnets of "Les Chimères," the sonnet called "Vers Dorés," the five sonnets of "Le Christ aux Oliviers," and, in facsimile of the autograph, the lyric called "Les Cydalises." The true facts of the life of Gérard have been told for the first time, from original

## 182 THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT

documents, by Mme. Arvède Barine, in two excellent articles in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, October 15 and November 1, 1897, since reprinted in *Les Nevrosés*, 1898.

### VILLIERS DE L'ISLE-ADAM

(1838--1889)

*Premières Poésies*, 1859; *Isis*, 1862; *Elin*, 1864; *Morgane*, 1865; *Claire Lenor* (in the *Revue des Lettres et des Arts*), 1867; *L'Evasion*, 1870; *La Révolte*, 1870; *Azrael*, 1878; *Le Nouveau Monde*, 1880; *Contes Cruels*, 1880; *L'Eve Future*, 1886; *Akëdysséril*, 1886; *L'Amour Suprême*, 1886; *Tribulat Bonhomet*, 1887; *Histoires Insolites*, 1888; *Nouveaux Contes Cruels*, 1889; *Axël*, 1890; *Chez les Passants*, 1890; *Propos d'Au-delà*, 1893.

Among works announced, but never published, it may be interesting to mention: *Scid*, *William de Strally*, *Faust*, *Poésies Nouvelles* (*Intermèdes*; *Gog*; *Ave*, *Mater Victa*; *Poésies diverses*), *La Tentation sur la Montagne*, *Le Vieux de la Montagne*, *L'Adoration des Mages*, *Méditations Littéraires*, *Mélanges*,

*Théâtre* (2 vols.), *Documents sur les Règnes de Charles VI. et de Charles VII.*, *L'Illusionisme*, *De la Connaissance de l'Utile*, *L'Exégèse Divine*.

A sympathetic, but slightly vague, Life of Villiers was written by his cousin, Vicomte Robert du Pontavice de Heussey: *Villiers de l'Isle-Adam*, 1893; it was translated into English by Lady Mary Lloyd, 1894. See Verlaine's *Poètes Maudits*, 1884, and his biography of Villiers in *Les Hommes d'Aujourd'hui*, the series of penny biographies, with caricature portraits, published by Vanier; also Mallarmé's *Villiers de l'Isle-Adam*, the reprint of a lecture given at Brussels a few months after Villiers' death. *La Révolte* was translated by Mrs. Theresa Barclay in the *Fortnightly Review*, December 1897. I have translated a little poem, *Aveu*, from the interlude of verse in the *Contes Cruels* called *Chant d'Amour*, in *Days and Nights*, 1889. An article of mine, the first, I believe, to be written on Villiers in English, appeared in the *Woman's World* in 1889; another in the *Illustrated London News* in 1891.

## ARTHUR RIMBAUD

(1854—1891)

*Une Saison en Enfer*, 1873; *Les Illuminations*, 1886; *Reliquaire*, 1891 (containing several poems falsely attributed to Rimbaud); *Les Illuminations: Une Saison en Enfer*, 1892; *Poésies Complètes*, 1895.

See also Paterné Berrichon, *La Vie de Jean-Arthur Rimbaud*, 1898; Paul Verlaine, *Les Poètes Maudits*, 1884, and the biography by Verlaine in *Les Hommes d'Aujourd'hui*. Mr. George Moore was the first to write about Rimbaud in England, in "Two Unknown Poets" (Rimbaud and Laforgue) in *Impressions and Opinions*, 1891. In Mr. John Gray's *Silverpoints*, 1893, there are translations of "Charleville" and "Sensation." The latter, and "Les Chercheuses de Poux," are translated by Mr. T. Sturge Moore in *The Vinedresser, and other Poems*, 1899.



## PAUL VERLAINE

(1844—1896)

*Poèmes Saturniens*, 1866; *Fêtes Galantes*, 1869; *La Bonne Chanson*, 1870; *Romances sans Paroles*, 1874; *Sagesse*, 1881; *Les Poètes Maudits*, 1884; *Jadis et Naguère*, 1884; *Les Mémoires d'un Veuf*, 1886; *Louise Leclercq* (suivi de *Le Poteau, Pierre Duchatelet, Madame Aubin*), 1887; *Amour*, 1888; *Parallèlement*, 1889; *Dédicaces*, 1890; *Bonheur*, 1891; *Mes Hôpitaux*, 1891; *Chansons pour Elle*, 1891; *Liturgies Intimes*, 1892; *Mes Prisons*, 1893; *Odes en son Honneur*, 1893; *Elégies*, 1893; *Quinze Jours en Hollande*, 1894; *Dans les Limbes*, 1894; *Épigrammes*, 1894; *Confessions*, 1895; *Chair*, 1896; *Invectives*, 1896.

The complete works of Verlaine are now in course of publication in three volumes at the Librairie Léon Vanier; a *Choix de Poésies*, 1891, with a preface by François Coppée, and a reproduction of Carrière's admirable portrait, is published in one volume by Charpentier; the series of *Hommes d'Aujourd'hui* contains twenty-seven bio-

graphical notices by Verlaine; and a considerable number of poems and prose articles exists, scattered in various magazines, some of them English, such as the *Senate*; in some cases the articles themselves are translated into English, such as "My Visit to London," in the *Savoy* for April 1896, and "Notes on England: Myself as a French Master," and "Shakespeare and Racine," in the *Fortnightly Review* for July 1894 and September 1894. The first English translation in verse from Verlaine is Arthur O'Shaughnessy's rendering of "Clair de Lune" in *Fêtes Galantes*, under the title "Pastel," in *Songs of a Worker*, 1881. A volume of translations in verse, *Poems of Verlaine*, by Gertrude Hall, was published in America in 1895. In Mr. John Gray's *Silverpoints*, 1893, there are translations of "Parsifal," "A Crucifix," "Le Chevalier Malheur," "Spleen," "Clair de Lune," "Mon Dieu m'a dit," and "Green." I have translated eight of the *Fêtes Galantes* and one of the *Romances sans Paroles* in the second edition of *Silhouettes*, 1896.

As I have mentioned, there have been many portraits of Verlaine. The three portraits drawn on lithographic paper by Mr. Rothenstein, and published in 1898, are but the latest, if also among

the best, of a long series, of which Mr. Rothenstein himself has done two or three others, one of which was reproduced in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1894, when Verlaine was in London. M. F. A. Cazals, a young artist who was one of Verlaine's most intimate friends, has done I should not like to say how many portraits, some of which he has gathered together in a little book, *Paul Verlaine : ses Portraits*, 1898. There are portraits in nine of Verlaine's own books, several of them by M. Cazals (roughly jotted, expressive notes of moments), one by M. Anquetin (a strong piece of thinking flesh and blood), and in the *Choix de Poésies* there is a reproduction of the cloudy, inspired poet of M. Eugène Carrière's painting. Another portrait, which I have not seen, but which Verlaine himself calls, in the *Dédicaces*, *un portrait enfin reposé*, was done by M. Aman-Jean. M. Niederhausern has done a bust in bronze, Mr. Rothenstein a portrait medallion. A new edition of the *Confessions*, 1899, contains a number of sketches; *Verlaine Dessinateur*, 1896, many more; and there are yet others in the extremely objectionable book of M. Charles Donos, *Verlaine Intime*, 1898. The *Hommes d'Aujourd'hui* contains a caricature-portrait, many other portraits have appeared in French

and English and German and Italian magazines, and there is yet another portrait in the admirable little book of Charles Morice, *Paul Verlaine*, 1888, which contains by far the best study that has ever been made of Verlaine as a poet. I believe Mr. George Moore's article, "A Great Poet," reprinted in *Impressions and Opinions*, 1891, was the first that was written on Verlaine in England; my own article in the *National Review* in 1892 was, I believe, the first detailed study of the whole of his work up to that date.

## JULES LAFORGUE

(1860—1887)

*Les Complaintes*, 1885; *L'Imitation de Notre-Dame la Lune*, 1886; *Le Concile Féerique*, 1886; *Moralités Légendaires*, 1887; *Derniers Vers*, 1890 (a privately printed volume, containing *Des Fleurs de Bonne Volonté*, *Le Concile Féerique*, and *Derniers Vers*); *Poésies Complètes*, 1894.

The first volume of an edition of the *Moralités Légendaires* was published in 1897, under the care of M. Lucien Pissarro, at the Sign of the Dial; it

is printed in Mr. Ricketts' admirable type, and makes one of the most beautiful volumes issued in French during this century. In 1896 M. Camille Mauclair, with his supple instinct for contemporary values, wrote a study, or rather an eulogy, of Laforgue, to which M. Maeterlinck contributed a few searching and delicate words by way of preface.

## STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

(1842—1898)

*Le Corbeau* (traduit de Poe), 1875; *La Dernière Mode*, 1875; *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*, 1876; *Vathek de Beckford*, 1876; *Petite Philologie à l'Usage des Classes et du Monde: Les Mots Anglais*, 1877; *Poésies Complètes* (photogravées sur le manuscrit), 1887; *Les Poèmes de Poe*, 1888; *Le Ten o'Clock de M. Whistler*, 1888; *Pages*, 1891; *Les Miens: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam*, 1892; *Vers et Prose*, 1892; *La Musique et les Lettres* (Oxford, Cambridge), 1894; *Divagations*, 1897; *Poésies*, 1899.

See, on this difficult subject, Edmund Gosse, *Questions at Issue*, 1893, in which will be found the first study of Mallarmé that appeared in English;

and Vittorio Pica, *Letteratura d'Eccezione*, 1899, which contains a carefully-documented study of more than a hundred pages. There is a translation of the poem called "Fleurs" in Mr. John Gray's *Silverpoints*, 1893, and my translation of "Hérodiade" is about to appear in *Images of Good and Evil*. Several of the poems in prose have been translated into English; my translation of the "Plainte d'Automne," contained in this volume, was made in momentary forgetfulness that the same poem in prose had already been translated by Mr. George Moore in *Confessions of a Young Man*. Mr. Moore also translated "Le Phénomène Futur" in the *Savoy*, July 1896.

### JORIS KARL HUYSMANS

(1848)

*Le Drageoir à Épices*, 1874; *Marthe, Histoire d'une Fille*, 1876; *Les Sœurs Vatard*, 1879; *Croquis Parisiens*, 1880; *En Ménage*, 1881; *A Vau-l'Eau*, 1882; *L'Art Moderne*, 1883; *A Rebours*, 1884; *Un Dilemme*, 1887; *En Rade*, 1887; *Certains*, 1889; *La Bièvre*, 1890; *Là-Bas*, 1891; *En Route*, 1895; *La Cathédrale*, 1898; *La*

*Bièvre et Saint-Séverin*, 1899. See also the short story, *Sac au Dos*, in the *Soirées de Medan*, 1880, and the pantomime, *Pierrot Sceptique*, 1881, in collaboration with Léon Hennique. *En Route* was translated into English by Mr. Kegan Paul, in 1896; and *La Cathédrale* by Miss Clara Bell, in 1898.

I have elsewhere dealt at greater length with Huysmans, whom I consider here only under a single aspect, as shown in a single book. The reader may be referred to my article on *En Route* in *Studies in Two Literatures*; of the longer study of the whole of Huysmans' work up to *Là-Bas*, which I published in the *Fortnightly Review* in March 1892, I care to preserve nothing but a personal impression of the man, which I give here as not perhaps without some psychological interest. At the time of which I speak he was writing *Là-Bas*.

"To realise how faithfully and how completely Huysmans has revealed himself in all he has written, it is necessary to know the man. 'He gave me the impression of a cat,' some interviewer once wrote of him; 'courteous, perfectly polite, almost amiable, but all nerves, ready to shoot out his claws at the least word.' And, indeed, there

is something of his favourite animal about him. The face is grey, wearily alert, with a look of benevolent malice. At first sight it is commonplace, the features are ordinary, one seems to have seen it at the Bourse or the Stock Exchange. But gradually that strange, unvarying expression, that look of benevolent malice, grows upon you, as the influence of the man makes itself felt. I have seen Huysmans in his office: he was formerly an employé in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a model employé; I have seen him in a café, in various houses; but I always see him in memory as I used to see him at the house of the bizarre Madame X. He leans back on the sofa, rolling a cigarette between his thin, expressive fingers, looking at no one and at nothing, while Madame X. moves about with solid vivacity in the midst of her extraordinary menagerie of *bric-à-brac*. The spoils of all the world are there, in that incredibly tiny *salon*; they lie underfoot, they climb up walls, they cling to screens, brackets, and tables; one of your elbows menaces a Japanese toy, the other a Dresden china shepherdess; all the colours of the rainbow clash in a barbaric discord of notes. And in a corner of this fantastic room, Huysmans lies back indifferently on the sofa, with the air of one



perfectly resigned to the boredom of life. Something is said by my learned friend who is to write for the new periodical, or perhaps it is the young editor of the new periodical who speaks, or (if that were not impossible) the taciturn Englishman who accompanies me; and Huysmans, without looking up, and without taking the trouble to speak very distinctly, picks up the phrase, transforms it, more likely transpierces it, in a perfectly turned sentence, a phrase of impromptu elaboration. Perhaps it is only a stupid book that some one has mentioned, or a stupid woman; as he speaks, the book looms up before one, becomes monstrous in its dulness, a masterpiece and miracle of imbecility; the unimportant little woman grows into a slow horror before your eyes. It is always the unpleasant aspect of things that he seizes, but the intensity of his revolt from that unpleasantness brings a touch of the sublime into the very expression of his disgust. Every sentence is an epigram, and every epigram slaughters a reputation or an idea. He speaks with an accent as of pained surprise, an amused look of contempt, so profound that it becomes almost pity, for human imbecility."

## MAURICE MAETERLINCK

(1862)

*Serres Chaudes*, 1889; *La Princesse Maleine*, 1890; *Les Aveugles* (*L'Intruse*, *Les Aveugles*), 1890; *L'Ornement des Noces Spirituelles*, de Ruysbroeck *l'Admirable*, 1891; *Les Sept Princesses*, 1891; *Pelléas et Mélisande*, 1892; *Alladine et Palomides*, *Intérieur*, *La Mort de Tintagiles*, 1894; *Annabella*, *de John Ford*, 1895; *Les Disciples à Sais et les Fragments de Novalis*, 1895; *Le Trésor des Humbles*, 1896; *Douze Chansons*, 1896; *Aglavaine et Sélysette*, 1896; *La Sagesse et la Destinée*, 1898.

M. Maeterlinck has had the good or bad fortune to be more promptly, and more violently, praised at the beginning of his career than at all events any other writer of whom I have spoken in this volume. His fame in France was made by a flaming article of M. Octave Mirbeau in the *Figaro* of August 24, 1890. M. Mirbeau greeted him as the "Belgian Shakespeare," and expressed his opinion of *La Princesse Maleine* by saying "M. Maeterlinck has given us the greatest work of genius that has been

produced in our time, and the most extraordinary and the most naïve too, comparable, (dare I say ?) superior in beauty to what is most beautiful in Shakespeare . . . more tragic than *Macbeth*, more extraordinary in thought than *Hamlet*." Mr. William Archer introduced M. Maeterlinck to England in an article called "A Pessimist Playwright" in the *Fortnightly Review*, September 1891. Less enthusiastic than M. Mirbeau, he defined the author of *La Princesse Maleine* as "a Webster who had read Alfred de Musset." A freely adapted version of *L'Intruse* was given by Mr. Tree at the Haymarket Theatre, January 27, 1892, and since that time many of M. Maeterlinck's plays have been acted, without cuts, or with but few cuts, at various London theatres. Several of his books have also been translated into English: *The Princess Maleine* (by Gerard Harry) and *The Intruder* (by William Wilson), 1892; *Pelleas and Melisanda* and *The Sightless* (by Laurence Alma Tadema), 1892; *Ruysbroeck and the Mystics* (by J. T. Stoddart), 1894; *The Treasure of the Humble* (by A. Sutro), 1897; *Aglavaine and Selysette* (by A. Sutro), 1897; *Wisdom and Destiny* (by A. Sutro) 1898; *Alladine and Palomides* (by A. Sutro), *Interior* (by William

Archer), and *The Death of Tintagiles* (by A. Sutro), 1899.

I have spoken, in this volume, chiefly of Maeterlinck's essays, and but little of his play, and I have said all that I had to say without special reference to the second volume of essays, *La Sagesse et la Destinée*. Like *Le Tresor des Humbles*, that book is a message, a doctrine, even more than it is a piece of literature. It is a treatise on wisdom and happiness, on the search for happiness because it is wisdom, not for wisdom because it is happiness. It is a book of patient and resigned philosophy, a very Flemish philosophy, more resigned than even *Le Tresor des Humbles*. In a sense it seems to aim less high. An ecstatic mysticism has given way to a kind of prudence. Is this coming nearer to the earth really an intellectual ascent or descent? At least it is a divergence, and it probably indicates a divergence in art as well as in meditation. Yet, while it is quite possible to at least indicate Maeterlinck's position as a philosopher, it seems to me premature to attempt to define his position as a dramatist. Interesting as his dramatic work has always been, there is, in the later dramas, so singular an advance in all the qualities that go to make great art, that

I find it impossible, at this stage of his development, to treat his dramatic work as in any sense the final expression of a personality. What the next stage of his development may be it is impossible to say. He will not write more beautiful dramas than he has written in *Aglavaine et Sélysette* and in *Pélleas et Mélisande*. But he may, and he probably will, write something which will move the general world more profoundly, touching it more closely, in the manner of the great writers, in whom beauty has not been more beautiful than in writers less great, but has come to men with a more splendid energy.

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BY THE SAME WRITER

VERSE

DAYS AND NIGHTS (*Out of Print*)

SILHOUETTES (*Out of Print*)

LONDON NIGHTS

AMORIS VICTIMA

IMAGES OF GOOD AND EVIL (*In the Press*)

PROSE

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF  
BROWNING

STUDIES IN TWO LITERATURES

AUBREY BEARDSLEY: AN ESSAY (*Illustrated*)

CITIES (*In Preparation*)

## THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT IN LITERATURE.\*

This book is interpretative of the general aims of the Symbolists. Strictly speaking it is not critical at all. The writers with whom it deals, Gérard de Nerval, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Jules Laforgue, Mallarmé, Huysmans, and Maeterlinck, are as diverse in power and influence as they are in matter and temperament. But it is not Mr Symons's present purpose to differentiate between their general powers, or the degree to which symbolism is their proper speech. They each, sooner or later, fluently or haltingly, have spoken it, as a native or an adopted language. That is the first and chief interesting fact to be told about them, he seems to say; the rest, the apportioning of great merit and partial failure, can wait. Besides, the book leaves the impression of having been written in an almost devotional mood. It is an act of homage to rediscoverers of the great aims of literature. In short, it is the book of a mood. The mood may be the sign of a long conviction, which, at a later day, may face battle for its principles, and examine coldly the varying merits of the exponents of these principles. The mood of homage is at the moment too strong for that. In other words, Mr. Symons is too recent a convert. But when he reaches the more critical stage he will never write of the matter so persuasively. His mood entirely conquered us on a first reading—his sincerity is so evident and the beauty of the expression which he has given it so rare. Our first and last words to him must be thanks for the keen enjoyment he has given us.

He does not torture himself for a definition of Symbolism, being content first to speak of it as "a literature in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream." Later, in speaking more of its form, he says, "And it is on the lines of that spiritualising of the word, that perfecting of form in its capacity for allusion and sugges-

\* "The Symbolist Movement in Literature." By Arthur Symons. (Heinemann.)



tion, that confidence in the eternal correspondences between the visible and the invisible universe which Mallarmé taught, and too intermittently practised that literature must now move, if it is any sense to move forward. Here, of course, is the point for attack. But even if we hold that all the stories are not told, that the annals of mere action may still play a part in literature, that externalities are still of account, this is not the time to be combative. We may say that Mallarmé proves nothing, since he does not write for human beings, that Huysmans seems to have taken Symbolism on his road, as a tourist visits this town or that, swearing to become the citizen of each. We may declare with much reason that Symbolism so far as it is self-conscious, is particularly destructive of literature, that Mysticism, its parent, is a dangerous drug, safe only for the peculiarly strong, since there is nothing like it for giving fluency and confidence to the brainless. It is best to accept Mr Symons's mood, and be glad of his reminder of these stammering, halting signs that our century has guessed the high mystery of life, the wastefulness of passion for temporal things, has seen the world as a veil of changing hues, half hiding, half revealing that which was from the beginning.

Only one criticism will we make, therefore. How can Mr Symons, with his exquisite sensibility, speak of Maeterlinck's prose, his "Tresor des Humbles" and "La Sagesse et la Destinée," as surpassing his dramas? The general reader holds with him, of course. But the general English reader prefers sermons to high imaginative literature. He is not interested in Symbol. He likes his symbols explained, his mysticism as explicit as possible. Maeterlinck is a great mystic who has in his prose come down from his native level to explain, to comment, has often lost his way, and has succumbed to the temptation of gush and fine writing. He is second rate when his thinking chooses the medium of prose. He is the best mystic when he is creator, not expositor. It is in the appreciation of Maeterlinck that Mr Symons shows the weakness of a recent conversion.

A. MACDONELL

